

Comedic Talmud:

Humor in Talmud and Rabbinic Sources

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Introduction

Speaking for myself, I derive great pleasure from the study of Talmud, Midrash, and other early Rabbinic texts. Better, I should say a great many pleasures. First is the pleasure of successfully decoding the language, if working from the original Hebrew and Aramaic texts. Then, the delight of unpacking what the text actually *means*. With these, naturally, come the joys of deeply thinking, acutely questioning, profoundly understanding, and genuinely learning. But sometimes, there is an additional distinct pleasure: amusement.

To be sure, there are times when my amusement comes at the expense of a text that time has not treated kindly (as at Niddah 31a-b where the rabbis express the belief that the sex of a child is determined by which parent has the later orgasm), and there are times when it comes at my own expense (as when my study partner and I once rashly presumed that the Aramaic *בי שמש* was a contraction of *בית שימוש* – a modern Hebrew euphemism for a toilet – which worked at first, but became increasingly, comedically untenable until at last we looked it up and found that in fact it is a contraction of *בין השמשות*, the time at which the Sabbath commences). Still, there are times when I am certain that my amusement comes from a genuinely comedic passage in

the text, and I am not alone in this belief, as evidenced by the inclusion of Talmudic anecdotes in The Big Book of Jewish Humor¹ and The Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor,² for instance.

It may not seem so to those raised in the modern liberal Jewish environment, but I find that among those of more traditional background, the notion of what amount to jokes in the Talmud and other sacred writings is uncomfortable, controversial, and perhaps even threatening. This suggests that we would benefit from finding an objective measure of what is funny – or more precisely, of what was funny to the sages – and that we should also give some attention to the serious value of funny passages to alleviate any discomfort or threat. This is a case where levity and gravity can happily coexist.

To accomplish these goals, we will examine some humor of comparable age with Talmudic sources – primarily Classical Roman humor – by way of comparison, and to appreciate the difficulties in fully apprehending ancient humor, and we will investigate a modern theory of humor called Benign Violation Theorem (BVT). Using these tools, we will the examine several Rabbinic pericopes for the features of humor according to BVT. In most cases, we will look at stories, though some are brief. In each case, we will also consider what causes the humorous episode to be raised within the Talmudic discussion, and look at the serious lessons of the story for us and its contribution to the topic at hand.

Chapter 1. Is Talmud Funny?

¹ William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (editors). The Big Book of Jewish Humor. Harper and Row Publishers, 1981.

² Henry D. Spaulding Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor. Jonathan David Publishers, 1969.

Our rabbis taught: A person should always be as patient as Hillel, and not be temperamental as Shammai. Once, two men bet with each other that whichever could anger Hillel would receive four hundred *zuzim*. One said, "I'll provoke him." It was a Friday afternoon and Hillel was washing his head [in preparation for the Sabbath]. The fellow went by Hillel's door calling out, "Is there a Hillel around here? Who is Hillel around here?" Hillel wrapped up [in a robe] and went out to greet him, saying, "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask." "Ask, my son, ask." "Why are Babylonians' heads ovoid?" "My son, you asked a great question," replied Hillel, "it's because they have no skilled midwives [so their heads are deformed in birth]."

The man left for a while and then returned, again calling out, "Is there a Hillel around? Is Hillel here?" Again, Hillel wrapped up and came out to greet him. "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask." "Ask, my son, ask." "Why are Palmyreans' eyes bleary?" "My son, you've asked a great question; it's because they live among the sands [which damage their eyes]."

The man left for a while and then returned, again calling out, "Is there a Hillel around? Is Hillel here?" Again, Hillel wrapped up and came out to greet him. "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask." "Ask, my son, ask." "Why are Africans' feet wide?" "My son, you've asked a great question; it's because they live among marshes [and walking in soggy soil flattens their feet]."

"I have many questions to ask," ventured the man, "but I am afraid you might get angry." Hillel wrapped up well and sat before the young man, saying, "Ask all the questions you have to ask." He replied, "Are you Hillel who is called the *Nasi* of Israel?" "Yes,"

answered Hillel. "If that is you, may there not be many like you in Israel!" "Why is that, my son?" asked Hillel. "Because I have lost four hundred *zuzim* because of you!" "Be careful of your temper," responded Hillel, "Hillel is worth your losing four hundred *zuz* and four hundred more over him; but Hillel will not lose his temper."

– Shabbat 30b ff.³

The Talmud is not a joke book. It is neither the purpose nor manner of the Talmud as a whole to amuse the student. However, within the pages of the Talmud and rabbinic literature are many episodes and escapades which a modern reader may find rather amusing and even humorous. Although humor, like taste or beauty, is in the eye of the beholder (the Hebrew expression על טעם וריח אין להתווכח, "there is no debating over flavors and scents," is apt), I think that once we get past the stilted language of precise translations and our training and habituation to read religious texts in a grave deadpan, the preceding statement is indisputable. What is open to debate is whether the humor that a modern may find in the Talmudic text is part of the original intent.

Among the reasons for skeptics to doubt that the Talmud does intentionally tell funny stories, the first and foremost is surely that the Talmud is a holy text that addresses serious and holy business. While I mean "serious" in the preceding remark in the sense of "important," it is no coincidence that "serious" can also be used as an antonym to "funny." Mirth does not lend itself

³ All translations not otherwise noted are my own, from the original language, with consultation of the resources listed as translation aids in the bibliography, including existing translations, to whose work I am indebted both where I hewed closely to their understanding and English phrasing, and also where I chose a completely different expression or even a divergent interpretation of the original text.

to solemnity; to suggest that Talmud is funny is perhaps to deny its gravity and consequently its authority.

Furthermore, on a more technical level, it must be recalled that the Talmud began, at least according to tradition, as oral lore (תורה שבעל פה). Until it was recorded in writing, every word had to be painstakingly memorized by repetition; indeed, the word *Mishnah*, the title of the older core of the Talmud, means "repetition." As such, the cost of including a particular pericope within the Talmudic text should be considered not in terms of column-inches, but in the great effort required of student and *meturgeman* to learn the additional text. In fact, even after the text was written down, for the following several centuries it had to be copied by hand, so that even then the cost of a passage could be measured not only in paper, but in scribal time invested transcribing manuscript. With superfluous material being quite "expensive" in these terms, it is unthinkable that Talmudic verbiage would be wasted on mere jokes.

These objections are sincere and well-taken; we shall not propose that Talmudic sources are included "merely" for amusement. Indeed, among the facets we shall consider as we proceed to examine various ostensibly funny rabbinic tales and interludes, we will always seek to understand the context in which the story is brought, and to probe the serious purposes it may serve which justify the expense of its inclusion.

Nevertheless, our contention and the purpose of our extended examination of various examples herein is that the Talmudic redactors did *knowingly* and *purposefully* include a considerable amount of funny material within the Talmudic and rabbinic corpus. There are several reasons to think so:

The essential raw material of the rabbinic canon is composed of rabbinic dicta. Another substantial genre within the body of Talmudic text comprises *aggadot* (legends) and *ma'asim* ([tales of] deeds) about the sages themselves (as distinct from *Midrashic* tales about biblical characters, which would also come under the broad heading of *aggadah*). The rabbis themselves were normal human beings, each with a unique personality, including a sense of humor. Arguably, a purpose for the many rabbinic tales – in addition to providing context for certain statements or demonstrating points of law evidenced in their behavior – is precisely to preserve a sense of the lives and personalities of these remarkable individuals. Some people, including some rabbis, are very funny people, and this comes through in the way they express and conduct themselves, even as serious professional thinkers.

In addition to being part of a personality, humor can sometimes serve deliberate constructive purposes. Earlier on the same page of Talmud that the story of Hillel's oft-interrupted bath begins (Shabbat 30b) we learn that the sage Rabbah would begin his lectures with a joke to lighten the mood, before proceeding to his main discourse in solemnity.⁴ From this we learn that – not surprisingly – there was an etiquette concerning appropriate times and places for humor, but also that at least Rabbah would be deliberately playful or funny in appropriate circumstances. We might further infer that, if humor was gauche in mid-lecture, we are more likely to find a rabbi being funny in a *ma'aseh* (story) than a *meimra* (saying), and although not examined rigorously herein, that expectation will be matched in the selection of humorous episodes we examine.

Another constructive purpose for humor in Talmudic material, in direct contrast to the limitation of the "expense" of memorizing material, is that a humorous story will often be more memorable

⁴ See also Pesachim 117a.

than the same lesson delivered in a dry fashion. That is to say that rather than wasting effort to memorize material that serves only to be funny, funny material may be deliberately employed *in place of* an unfunny expression of the same point, because it is easier for the student to remember.⁵

In response to the concern that holy material is dead serious, let us note that the bible itself contains quite humorous passages. A notable humorous occasion in the Torah itself is the episode of Balaam with his ass (Num. ch. 22-24). The story is funny in a general sense, but its humor comes mostly at the expense of, and serves to mock and ridicule, Balaam. The fact that this great "seer" is blind to what is happening before his eyes by comparison with his donkey is intended to deride him, and our humorous pleasure in the story is of a very pointed kind. An entire biblical book which is quite funny is the Book of Esther. As it is not the primary topic of concern here, I will not spell out the details, but Adele Berlin writes in The Jewish Study Bible that its "attributes are characteristic of low comedy," (Berlin 1623)⁶ while Marc Zvi Brettler writes in How to Read the Jewish Bible that, "All of these pieces of evidence – the factual errors, the literary symmetry, and the lighthearted style – point to the fact that Esther is not a historical account. Rather, it is more like a comedy, burlesque, or farce." (Brettler 269)⁷ Moreover, the holiday associated with the book, Purim, demonstrates conclusively that frivolity and felicity are not exclusive of meaningfulness and gravity.

⁵ I recently attended the installation of a colleague, at which the officiating rabbi, in his remarks, told a joke which I had coincidentally also deployed from the bimah a few weeks previously. Afterward, one of my congregants who was in attendance reminded me, "Rabbi, you told the same story." As I later remarked to my two colleagues (the freshly installed rabbi and the ceremonial officiant), I still don't know whether my congregants pay heed to the moral content of my sermons, but at least I know they remember the jokes.

⁶ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (editors). The Jewish Study Bible. Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁷ Marc Zvi Brettler. How to Read the Jewish Bible. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Although we have noted that humor is a subjective sense, it would be helpful to establish a relatively objective definition of humor which would enable us to say not only, "this makes *me* laugh," but to be confident that those who wrote, who included, and who redacted the rabbinic material into its present form would also have found it funny. This will be the goal of our next chapter.

Chapter 2. How do we know what was funny 2000 years ago?

At face value, the Mishnah attributes specific statements at least as far back as Simon the Just (Avot 1:2), who lived in the fourth century BCE (Bader 44).⁸ Perhaps some anonymous statements are as old or older. We could say that the height of Tannaitic activity proceeds from the era of Hillel and Shammai in the first century BCE to the compilation of the Mishnah, traditionally by Rabbi Judah the Prince at the outset of the third century CE. The latest attributed quotations in the Babylonian Gemara date to the close of the fifth century CE. Redaction, likely including the addition of anonymous questions and statements structuring the dialectic (the *Stamma d'Gemara*), may have continued for some time afterward. It is simply impossible to *comprehensively* understand what would have been considered funny over such a temporal and geographic span, after the passage of so much time. Unfortunately, even beyond the question of humor, the sense of much cultural and topical reference from any such ancient writing is

⁸ Gershom Bader (translated by Solomon Katz). The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages. Jason Aronson, Inc., 1988.

surely lost forever.⁹ Fortunately, for our purposes, cultural change is much more likely to mean that what was originally funny is lost on us, rather than that we find something funny that was not so intended. Where there is humor created by cultural change, such as scientific, medical, or demonological speculations that are laughably misguided by modern standards, I suggest that we are generally aware that this is the source of our amusement, and would not confuse this with deliberate humor.

There is an additional challenge in understanding the humor of ancient texts such as Talmud. Saadia Gaon and Maimonides assert that the Tannaitic sages privately transcribed Oral Law for themselves, while Rashi maintains that even the Mishnah itself was not committed to writing until the Saboraic period (ca. 6th century CE).¹⁰ In either case, for obvious reasons, mechanical printing of Talmud text could not begin until shortly after the invention of the printing press near the close of the fifteenth century. This means that the entire text was copied manually for at least ten centuries, and some particulars may have preserved by the combination of oral repetition and manual copying for eighteen centuries or more in total. During all that span, transmitters and copyists may have consciously or unconsciously emended texts to make sense to themselves. If the sense of a joke was already confused or lost in previous generations,

⁹ To give a contemporary example, a 1988 special episode of the BBC television series "Blackadder" entitled "Blackadder: The Cavalier Years" features the actor Stephen Fry portraying King Charles I (who was beheaded at the conclusion of the English Civil War in 1649) as a caricature of the present-day Charles, Prince of Wales. To get the over-arching joke requires the viewer to recognize an impression of the voice and mannerisms of Prince Charles, but many smaller jokes require a closer familiarity with Charles' reputation and activities (e.g. "So many people can't spell nowadays, especially in the inner cities, which is my area of interest."). For most American viewers, and almost certainly for anyone viewing the show 1000 years hence, the words will make sense, but the jokes will be lost.

¹⁰ Ephraim Elimelech Urbach. "Mishnah" in Encyclopedia Judaica Vol. 12. Keter Publishing House, 1971. S.v. "The Question of Committing the Mishnah to Writing" at column 105.

scribes may have miscopied the text over centuries, making the original intent (indeed, the basic meaning) even more obscure.

In her Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up,¹¹ Mary Beard provides an illuminating example of these challenges, from the perspective of modern reconstruction rather than viewing the decay of a text by mis-copying over time (which is of course impossible unless we could discover the original and all the manuscripts between that and the present version). For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will summarize rather than quote Beard's description:

In his Handbook on Oratory (*Institutio Oratoria*)¹², the first century CE Roman orator and author Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (Quintillian), addressing the use of humor in oratory, refers approvingly to the humorous quip of a defendant named Hispo in a courtroom exchange. The extant Latin manuscripts apparently read: "Ut Hispo obicientibus arbore crimina accusatori mentis,"¹³ which Beard judges to be "hopelessly ungrammatical," incomprehensible, and untranslatable. Beard notes that the text has been subjected to centuries of copying and scholarly emendation, and cites the modern emendation of D.A. Russell in the Loeb Classical Library¹⁴ as a standard. It reads, "Ut Hispo *obicienti atrociora* crimina accusatori, 'me ex te

¹¹ Mary Beard. Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up. University of California Press, 2014.

¹² Specifically, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book VI, Chapter 3, Section 100.

¹³ This is something of a reconstruction on my own part, as Beard never fully quotes the manuscript version(s). I have not attempted to translate this form, as it would produce nonsense, with a tree making an unexpected mid-sentence appearance and unclear grammatical relations between the words. Translations are provided *in situ* with the emendations proposed by scholars.

¹⁴ I am paraphrasing Beard's reference to this work and have not accessed it directly. Full information is available in Beard's bibliography.

metiris?” (I have italicized the emendations), which translates as, “When Hispo was being charged with pretty outrageous crimes, he said to his accuser, ‘Are you measuring me according to your own standards?’” While this effort makes some sense of the passage, it does not seem to live up to Quintilian's admiration.

A scholar named Charles Murgia¹⁵ proposes instead the following, less radical, emendation: “Ut Hispo *obicienti barbare crimina accusatori*, ‘mentis!’” This version yields, “When Hispo was being charged with crimes in barbarisms (i.e. in poor Latin), he said to the accuser (ungrammatically), ‘You is lying!’” In this version, the confusing grammar is the very point of the wisecrack, as Hispo mocks his prosecutor's bad Latin by mangling his own. It is easy to see how some medieval monk-scribe, whose first language was not Latin, missed the joke and botched the transcription. However, as elegant as this emendation is – in its deliberate inelegance – Beard rightly asks, “[T]he nagging question is: Whose joke is it? Has Murgia really taken us back to the Roman quip, or has he actually adjusted the Latin to produce a satisfactorily modern joke?” (Beard 54-55)

In addition to demonstrating the fragility of a humorous text, this example brings up a very productive means to explore what would have been considered humorous in the Talmudic era, which is to examine contemporaneous writings and artifacts which we know are meant to be humorous, and thankfully the Classical Greek and Roman civilizations left us some examples. Mary Beard's entire book focuses on the challenges of trying to reconstruct and understand Roman writings which are clearly intended to be humorous, and the example above shows how difficult this can sometimes be. Among the writings examined by Beard are several oratorical

¹⁵ As the preceding note, I have not examined Murgia's work directly. Full bibliographical information can be found in Beard.

and rhetorical manuals which, like Quintilian's book cited above, discuss humor as a rhetorical tool. One of the most useful for our purposes is Marcus Tullius Cicero's mid-first century BCE *On the Orator* (*De Oratore*). In Platonic style, the book is structured as a discussion of oratorical technique among several real interlocutors, one of whom, Gaius Julius Caesar Strabo Vopiscus (known as Strabo; he is related to his namesake Gaius Julius Caesar and is the great-uncle of Caesar's rival Marc Antony, and known for his witty oratory), leads discussion specifically about oratorical uses of humor. Strabo's discourse addresses what laughter is and where it comes from, whether an orator should seek to provoke it and to what extent, and finally and most extensively how to categorize the laughable (that is, humor). Some of the most useful points follow:

At the outset of Strabo's section, Cicero defines two categories of oratorical wit: *cavillatio* (extended wit) and *dicacitas* (barbs).¹⁶ Reasons cited for introducing humor into oratory include earning goodwill, impressing with cleverness, mocking an opponent, relieving tension, and avoiding challenges the speaker can't reason past. Just as for a contemporary politician, a witty and apropos riposte was considered quite a winner ("Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."), while a joke that seemed generic, rehearsed, and "canned" could backfire badly. Rhetorical wit is divided into that which depends on a precise wording for humor, and that which is substantively funny and can be rephrased without detracting from its effect. Within these categories, Cicero/ Strabo identifies the following types of witticisms: "jokes from ambiguity, from the intrusion of the unexpected, from wordplay, from the inclusion of lines of verse (not a familiar modern category

¹⁶ While this paper focuses more on extended funny stories as they provide greater grist for analysis, the Talmud's dialectic is certainly full of witty barbs, attacks, and ripostes. A fine Roman example of the latter comes from Strabo's half-brother Catulus, whose name means "puppy." His opponent in a theft case attempted to silence him by mockingly sneering, "why are you barking, Puppy Dog?" to which Catulus instantly retorted, "because I see a thief."

of the laughable), from words taken literally, from witty comparisons or images, from understatement, from irony, and so on." (Beard 112)

As Beard notes, the quotation of a line of familiar verse would not necessarily be considered funny by a modern reader or audience, though it might display some urbanity and cleverness. However, we do find that the Talmudic voices frequently quote not only biblical sources, but also common sayings of the day. It is possible that in their time these quotations were meant to add a light and humorous, or at least impishly clever, tone to the discussions they appear in.

Another important ancient source for recapturing a sense of ancient (Roman) humor is a book known as *Philogelos*, which means "The Laughter Lover." Though written in Greek ("decidedly unstylish Greek," says Beard), the book is generally dated to the fourth or fifth century CE (during the Amoraic period, in Talmudic terms) and considered a Roman product.¹⁷ It is a joke book, containing 265 jokes, from one-liners to about paragraph length, with about half featuring the stock caricature of the *scholastikos*, or foolish scholar (Beard usually translates this as "egghead;" my mother would call him a "tzudreyte professor"). Besides the *scholastikos*, almost all the jokes in *Philogelos* target a "type" character, such as the cowardly boxer, the man with bad breath, or the fellow from Abdera (who compares with the Chelmite of European Jewish jokes). In most cases, the structure of the jokes and the language itself allow the type character to be identified from the first word of the joke. Beard notes that some jokes within the *Philogelos* are generalizations of jokes or tales which are attested in earlier sources with the names of famous individuals rather than type characters, though perhaps this particular detail has less to

¹⁷ Technically, the book as it is known today is a later – perhaps tenth century – amalgamation of earlier manuscripts and sources.

do with the *Philogelos* or Roman humor particularly, and more to do with the lifecycle of a joke generally.

Beard gleans some additional patterns from among the jokes in the *Philogelos*. She writes, "A rather more unexpected convention held up for particular scrutiny in the *Philogelos* is that of number... Variants on this theme are found throughout the collection, playing space, size, time, and value against the symbols of number in subtly different ways." (Beard 198,199) An example in this category is the *scholastikos* who finds himself aboard ship in a storm; as the other passengers throw their luggage overboard to lighten the load, he pulls out an IOU he holds and erases a portion of the debt. Such jokes set the abstract symbolism of a number against the concrete realities it represents. Similarly, a number of jokes in the collection probe issues of personal identity; these include versions of a joke that still lives today in the form of the person who answers the door (or phone) with "I'm not here."

A final area deserving of some consideration is sex-related humor. Blue humor in various forms has been around for a long time. In his comedy *Lysistrata* ("The Army Disbander"), the Greek playwright Aristophanes writes of a woman who creates a war of the sexes as she strives to end the Peloponnesian War by persuading her fellow Greek wives to withhold sex from their husbands until they negotiate peace. One *Philogelos* sex joke is worth quoting as it bears some relation to a Talmudic scenario we will see later on. Here it is as Beard translates: "A *scholastikos* got up one night and into bed with his grandmother. Taking a beating for it from his father, he said, 'Hey, you— it's been such a long time that you've been screwing my mother without getting a beating from me, are you angry that you found me just once on top of your mother?'" (Beard 197)

Summarizing very broadly, it does not seem that ancient senses of humor were markedly different from our own, rather that norms and expectations were different, and some humor is generated by meeting or by confounding norms and expectations (more on the generation of humor below). Our highly abridged review of Mary Beard's exploration of Roman humor helps us understand some of those particular changes for that culture, which should give us a loose basis for comparison with the Talmudic culture which was contemporaneous and in contact with Rome. Her study of passages that we know were considered funny by contemporary authors also shows how easily the humor of a quip or joke can be lost to later generations, although she is at pains to point out that there is no guarantee that all of them were ever *good* jokes (that is, we may suspect a failure of transmission or interpretation in a flat joke when in fact we *understand* it just fine, but it's just not funny). It would serve us well to formulate a general theory of humor which would give us an objective basis to adjudge whether a statement or story ought to be recognizably humorous (with allowance for cultural specificity, of course), independently of whether one is personally amused.

As it happens, philosophers including Aristotle and Plato have been proposing and examining theories of laughter and humor since ancient times. In today's philosophical community, most opinion has coalesced around three theories referred to as Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief. Superiority is championed by Thomas Hobbes (and often traced to Aristotle and Plato, although Beard adduces statements from these and other ancient theorists that would comport with the other theories as well); it suggests that humor is produced when we see ourselves superior to another, and applies well to pointed, mocking humor. Incongruity is the favorite of Kant and Kierkegaard; it proposes that humor comes when something is perceived to be out-of-place or illogical. Relief is the theory of such as Freud, and proposes that psychological energy is stored up in anticipation of being needed to repress an inappropriate feeling, so when something

obviates that need for repression, the energy is released as laughter; this theory does not particularly describe or predict what should qualify as humorous. Each of the theories has its difficulties. None is highly predictive. None is complete; each seems to account for only some kinds of humor. Further, none explains why some things are *not* funny despite meeting its conditions. For instance, the superiority theory does not explain why we don't find it humorous to see a homeless person, despite feeling superior, while incongruity theory does not explain why we are not amused when Amazon delivers the wrong book, despite the incongruity. (See IEP and SEP)

A new theory called Benign Violation Theory (BVT) has been proposed by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren. BVT can account for a wide variety of laughter-inducement (including tickling) and can often explain why something is *not* funny. Following is the description of the theory from the website of McGraw's Humor Research Lab (HuRL) at the University of Colorado:¹⁸

The Humor Research Lab uses the Benign Violation Theory as its theoretical foundation.

In collaboration with Caleb Warren, McGraw has been developing and testing a general theory of humor called the benign violation theory. The theory builds on work by a linguist, Tom Veatch, and integrates existing humor theories to propose that humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions occur simultaneously. For example, play fighting and tickling, which produce laughter in humans (and other primates), are benign violations because they are physically threatening but harmless attacks.

¹⁸ http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/Benign_Violation_Theory.html as of 12/25/14

A strength of the theory is that it also explains when things not funny: a situation can fail to be funny because it depicts a violation that does not simultaneously seem benign, or because it depicts a benign situation that has no violation. For example, play fighting and tickling cease to elicit laughter either when the attack stops (strictly benign) or becomes too aggressive (malign violation). Jokes similarly fail to be funny when either they are too tame or too risqué.

According to the theory, a violation refers to anything that threatens one's beliefs about how the world should be. That is, something seems threatening, unsettling, or wrong. From an evolutionary perspective, humorous violations likely originated as threats to physical well-being (e.g., the attacks that make up tickling, play fighting), but expanded to include threats to psychological well-being (e.g., insults, sarcasm), including behaviors that break social norms (e.g., strange behaviors, flatulence), cultural norms (e.g., unusual accents, most scenes from the movie Borat), linguistic norms (e.g., puns, malapropisms), logic norms (e.g., absurdities, non-sequiturs), and moral norms (e.g., disrespectful behavior, bestiality).

However, most things that are violations do not make people laugh. For a violation to produce humor it also needs to be perceived as benign. That is, it needs to seem okay, safe, or acceptable. Research in HuRL has highlighted three ways that a violation can seem benign: 1) Alternative norms (e.g., one meaning of a phrase in a pun doesn't make sense, but the other meaning does), 2) commitment to a violated norm (e.g., men find sexist jokes funnier than women do), and 3) psychological distance (e.g., "comedy is tragedy plus time").

Summarizing, BVT posits that humor arises when the "laugher" simultaneously perceives a violation of some norm, boundary or expectation, and that the violation is unthreatening – whether because it doesn't affect them intimately, because they don't care deeply about the

norm, or because they can frame the situation in terms of an alternate norm that is preserved. BVT explains why a friend falling down the stairs (violating expectations) is funny if they are unhurt (benign), but not if they are hurt (not benign); it explains why a child may laugh even if the friend is hurt (they have not deeply developed empathy yet, so the injury is psychologically distant), and why the laughter hurts the feelings of the child who fell (not benign to them!). Further, if we take the leap to assume that our subconscious interprets humor and laughter through a BVT-like frame, then the theory explains not only the laugh itself, but the reassurance of the laugh in both black humor and "laughing in the face of danger" (asserting that the situation is ultimately benign), the offensiveness of an inappropriate laugh (implying that another's violation is benign to the laugher, see above), and the threat of an "evil" laugh, which telegraphs an impending violation of a rule and/or person that the villain clearly disregards.

For the remainder of this discussion, we will employ BVT as our measure of what is "objectively" funny in rabbinic material, but first let us acknowledge some limitations. First, note that we have not really solved the problem of knowing what was funny to a rabbi 2000 years ago, but merely divided it into component questions of what was benign and violative to a rabbi of 2000 years ago. We hope we can be more objective and definitive about these measures, however. Second, even within BVT, humor can never be truly objective, as its component parts, violation and benignity, are subjective. However, we can use BVT and our knowledge of rabbinic culture and of human nature to generalize some expectations of what might be violative or benign to the typical sage or student. Unfortunately, unless a joke book turns up amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls or Geniza fragments, we will likely never have a means to test our hypotheses against Pharisaic senses of humor. Third, BVT itself is only a theory, despite many intriguing experiments supporting its parameters and predictions (see the bibliography for several articles thereon).

Let us now briefly consider the story of Hillel in the bath (above) through the lens of BVT. In its Talmudic context, it follows some mention of rabbis being insulted (and not taking it as well as Hillel) and leads on to a series of well-known (and also very funny) short anecdotes comparing the temperaments of Hillel and his testy colleague Shammai, as they are confronted with seemingly transgressive requests by prospective converts. The violations in the story are central to its plot. In his effort to annoy Hillel, the protagonist shows no formalities of respect (Hillel was the president of the Sanhedrin and should have been addressed deferentially) and pulls Hillel away from his pre-Sabbath bath repeatedly to ask stupid and perhaps even offensive questions.¹⁹ Even Hillel's response violates our expectations (the first time we hear the story) as he takes the disrespect with equanimity, and as he repeatedly praises the ridiculous questions of his interlocutor. At the same moment, Hillel's calm and patient responses defuse the tension and show the violations to be benign.

The application of BVT allows us to assess that the humor of this account would have been evident to an ancient audience. Moreover, in this instance we should also note the excellent humorous storytelling applied as the tripled repetition of each element from crying out Hillel's name on the street, to Hillel having to get back out of the bath, to Hillel's "great question, my son" draws out the story and amplifies the tension of the situation and the hilarity of its resolution. The humor of the story, and those that follow, punches up the moral lesson that is stated at its outset (be patient like Hillel, not temperamental like Shammai) as Hillel's patient and caring demeanor salvages one comically disastrous situation after another.

¹⁹ Although certainly offensive to modern sensibilities, I'm not so sure a late Second-Temple era Judean would take offense to the physical stereotyping of alien ethnic groups. However, Hillel himself was born in Babylonia, so some read the question about Babylonians' heads as a shot at Hillel's own appearance.

Chapter 3. Oh, Choni!

The shofar-alarm is sounded for any public calamity except excessive rain. Once, they said to Choni the Circle-maker, "pray for rain to fall." He replied, "Go, bring in your [clay] Passover ovens so they don't soften [in the rain]. He prayed, but no rains fell. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it, saying before [God], "Master of the Universe, Your children look to me, as I am like a member of Your own household. I swear by Your Great Name that I shall not move from here until You have mercy on Your children. Rain began to trickle. He continued, "Not for this have I prayed, but for rain [to fill] cisterns, ditches, and caves." It began to fall furiously. He continued, "Not for this have I prayed, but for rains of benevolence, blessing, and benefit." The rain [then] fell normally, [but continued] until the Jews had to leave Jerusalem for [the high ground of] the Temple Mount because of the rain. They came and said to [Choni], "Just as you prayed for it to fall, pray for it to go away." He told them, "Go see if the Losers' Stone (a high point in Jerusalem where lost and found announcements were posted) has been washed away."

Shimon ben Shetach sent him the message: "Were you not Choni, I would have decreed the ban of excommunication on you, but what could I do to you, for you are petulant towards God yet He does your will, like a son who is petulant towards his father who does his will. Of you, Scripture says (Proverbs 23:25), "Let your father and mother be happy, let her who bore you have joy."

– Mishnah Taanit 3:8

One time, most of the month of Adar passed and no rain had fallen. They said to Choni the Circle-maker, "pray, and the rains will fall." He prayed but they didn't fall. He drew a circle and stood within it as the prophet Habakuk had done, as it is said (Habakuk 2:1): "Upon my watch I shall stand, etc." He proclaimed before [God], "Master of the Universe, Your children look to me as I am like a member of Your own household. I swear by Your Great Name that I Shall not move from here until You have mercy on Your children." The rain began to trickle. His students said to him, "Rabbi, may we see you and not die, it seems to us that this [trickle of] rain is falling only to release you from your vow." He exclaimed, "Not for this have I prayed, but for rain [to fill] cisterns, ditches, and caves." [The rains then] fell furiously, every drop as large as the mouth of a barrel, and the sages estimated that no individual drop was less than a *log* (about .3 liters). Choni's students said, "Rabbi, may we see you and not die, it seems to us this rain is falling for no other reason than to destroy the world!" He proclaimed before [God], "Not for this have I prayed, but for rains of benevolence, blessing, and benefit." The rain [then] fell normally, [but continued] until the Jews had to leave Jerusalem for [the high ground of] the Temple Mount because of the rain. They said to him, "Rabbi, just as you prayed for it to fall, so pray for it to go away." He answered them, "Thus have I received the tradition: One does not pray [for cessation] of excess goodness. Nevertheless, bring me a bull for a thanks-offering." They brought him the bull and he placed both hands on it. He proclaimed before [God], "Master of the Universe, Your people Israel, whom You took out of Egypt, they can't take too much good any more than too much punishment. When You are angered with them, they can't take it, but when you shower them with too much of Your goodness, they can't take that either. May it be Your will that the rains stop, and let there be relief (ריוח) for the world." Thereupon, the wind (רוח) blew, the clouds were

scattered, and the sun shone. They went out and saw that the Temple Mount was covered in truffles and mushrooms.

Shimon ben Shetach sent him the message: "Were you not Choni, I would have decreed the ban of excommunication on you, for if these were like the years of Elijah, when the keys to the rains were in Elijah's hands (that is, when Elijah had decreed to King Ahab that no rain would fall and there would be famine), wouldn't the Heavenly Name have been desecrated by your imposition? Yet, what could I do to you, for you are petulant towards God yet He does your will, like a son who is petulant towards his father who does his will. [The child] says, "Bathe me in warm water," and he does; "bathe me in cold water," and he does; "give me nuts, almonds, apricots, and pomegranates," and he does. Of you, Scripture says (Proverbs 23:25), "Let your father and mother be happy, let her who bore you have joy."

[...]

Said Rabbi Jochanan: All his life, this righteous man [Choni] was disturbed over this verse (Psalm 126:1): "A song of ascents: When the Lord returned those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers." He wondered, is it possible for seventy years to seem like a dream? Can anyone sleep for seventy years? One day he was on the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. [Choni] asked him, "Since a carob does not give fruit for seventy years, is it so obvious to you that you're going to live seventy more years to eat from it?" He answered, "I found a world with carob trees in it [that I did not plant]. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too plant for my descendants."

[Choni] sat down to eat bread. A slumber (שינתא) came over him, and he slept. A grotto (משוניתא) enclosed him, concealing him from view, and he slept seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man eating from the carob tree. He asked, "Do you know who planted this tree?" and the man answered, "my father's father." Choni said, "evidently, I slept for seventy years!" He noticed his ass had given birth to generations of mules.

Choni went home. He asked [the people around], "where is the son of Choni the Circle-maker?" They answered, "his son is no more, but his grandson is [alive]." He said, "I am he (Choni)," but they didn't believe him. He went to the *beit Midrash*, where he heard the rabbis say, "this law is as clear to us nowadays as in the days of Choni the Circle-maker, who would resolve all the difficulties the rabbis brought to him when he went up to the *beit Midrash*." He said to them, "I am he!" but they didn't believe him, and they didn't give him the honor due him. His feelings were crushed; he prayed for mercy that he should die, and his soul rested (he died). Said Rava, this is what is meant when people say, "Either companionship or death."

– Taanit 23a²⁰

The stories of Choni, followed in the Gemara by tales of his descendants, arise in the context of the Mishnah instructing about fasting to pray for rain in a drought, so Choni's circle-making story is quite apropos, and the rest follows by association. It is striking that the Gemara chooses to retell the circle-making story as its reaction to finding the story itself in the Mishnah! Not a *braitā*

²⁰ This translation follows the text as preserved in the Ein Yaakov (עין יעקב), which is a compilation of exclusively *Aggadic* material from within the Talmud. The standard Vilna edition has some slight differences, the most notable being that in it Choni inquires of the planting man to learn that carobs need 70 years to give fruit, and the expression "his soul rested" is instead simply "he died."

(a Tannaitic text from outside the Mishnah) cited to examine some contradiction with the Mishnah's rendition, but an outright retelling, without comment, by the *Stamma*. I am not aware of any other such instance in the Talmud. For the most part, the Gemara's telling reads like a more detailed and extended version of the story, or perhaps even like a Midrash on the Mishnah text.²¹ It is not immediately clear, and the Gemara does not comment on, what particular value is added by the additional/different/missing details.

In his Rabbinic Stories,²² Jeffrey Rubenstein makes several enlightening observations about the differences between the two tellings of the circle-making tale, though he leaves it to us to draw conclusions. The two tellings have identical structure, meaning that the two likely have an evolutionary relationship or at least share a distinct common source. As noted, the Gemara's version is generally richer in sensory and dialogic details, but Rubenstein perceptively observes that details of Jerusalem geography and custom – which would lack recognition and immediacy among a Babylonian audience – are omitted. According to Rubenstein, the Babylonian version softens the portrayal of the miracle worker: it eliminates his cocky remark about protecting the ovens; it changes the sarcastic finality of his refusal to pray for the rains to stop into a well-reasoned hesitancy to do so, and an equally reasonable acquiescence to necessity; it justifies Choni's childish (according to Ben Shetach) method of blackmail-prayer by reference to a biblical precedent; and it records his relatively eloquent final prayer. (Rubenstein 130-131) While this is true regarding the retelling of the circle-making story itself, we should note on the other

²¹ There are a number of Midrashim which turn monologues into dialogues, much as the Gemara inserts the prompting of the students into Choni's series of prayers for just the right rain, e.g. Ruth's "whither thou goest" speech (Ruth 1:16, Ruth Rabbah 2:22), or "take your son, your only one..." (Gen. 22:2, Gen. R. 55:7).

²² Jeffrey Rubenstein. Rabbinic Stories. Paulist Press, 2002.

hand that the Gemara goes on to include the "Jewish Rip Van Winkle" story, not found in the Mishnah, which adds further mockery and a baleful ending to the legend of Choni.

Given the facts above, we can proffer several possible explanations of the differences in the retelling, though in the final analysis they are only speculations – to paraphrase Ibn Ezra, המשכילים נדמו, those who knew were silent on the matter. It is probably fair to suppose that during the Tannaitic period the rabbis may have regarded itinerant miracle-working preachers (Jesus being the most famous) as genuine threats to their own authority, to Jewish unity such as it was, and to right belief and practice among the common populace. By the Amoraic era, however, particularly in Babylon, the rabbis were firmly established as masters of the tradition, and temporal power within the nation in exile was secured through the office of the exilarch. Perhaps, then, the sages of that later age were unthreatened, and moved by nostalgia for such as Choni to lighten the mockery or to restore some kinder details from an older source that were squelched from the Mishnah. Similarly, if we suppose that the Mishnah's source version of the story included the additional details and was associated with the second story, as found in the Gemara's rendition, we might suggest that while the source and the Gemara let the point build over the two tales, the editor of the Mishnah was more constrained to stay on topic and so included only the first story, but compensated by removing the mitigating points and punching up the ridicule in its presentation of Choni.

While these thoughts may account for the different tones of the two tellings, they don't seem to provide the Gemara a compelling reason to actually repeat the story. Perhaps the Babylonian scholars simply found the richer telling and the subsequent stories – not only their second Choni story, but the stories of his descendants which follow in the Gemara – too juicy to pass over the opportunity. Whatever the reason, as with Hillel's bath above, drawing out the story adds to its

vividness, drama, and humor. The Choni stories can be read in a deadpan, rendering Choni a great sage and miracle-worker, or can be read with a note of humorous derision as God playing a series of practical jokes on Choni, calling his real status and esteem into question. Let us turn to the tool of BVT to elucidate the humor therein.

Violations abound in these stories. Choni's confidence in his abilities seems to extend into arrogance as his first reaction to the request to produce rain is to instruct the people to protect their stoves from the impending deluge (Mishnah version only). Choni's unusual prayer methodology, the circle, as well as the repeated updates of the prayer to reach the Goldilocks point ("just right"), violate expectations about how one entreats the almighty; not only are they simply unusual, but they can be regarded as petulant and improper. In fact, Shimon ben Shetach, the *Av Beit Din* (second-ranking officer of the Sanhedrin), says precisely that, although he declines to follow through on the intimation of excommunication. God Himself violates our expectations as well, as he grants Choni's prayers after the fashion of a genie, deliberately following the letter but not the spirit of Choni's prayers until Choni gets the words just right to leave no wiggle room – and just like a classic genie story, Choni goes through three wishes to get it right. Choni's seventy-year sleep is unnatural, to say the least, and leaves him in a situation of dramatic irony; his grandson's generation treat him like a madman because his claim to be Choni is indeed mad in their eyes, but we and he know the truth and recognize the violation of his dignity. Finally, Choni's wish to die is also violative of the usual Jewish norms, albeit that his situation is not a usual one.

There are also several factors that keep these many violations benign. Most importantly, despite the Goldilocks game, God ultimately accedes to Choni, the rains fall in proper fashion, the drought is ended, and the world is not flooded too very much. Despite Shimon ben Shetach's

excoriation, and his likening of Choni to a spoiled child, which is no compliment, he too acknowledges that God has responded affirmatively to Choni and his methods. Finally, Choni's wish to die is somewhat affirmed by the fact that God grants it, and without any further overt comment from the storyteller. Indeed, the expression "his soul rested" can be taken simply as a euphemism for death, but could also be read to imply that he was comforted by it.²³ Finally, as we learned from Cicero in chapter 2, the quotation of a known saying moralizing the story, a cutesy one in Aramaic at that, may have struck a humorous or lighthearted note for an ancient audience.

Based on these factors, we can assert under the rubric of BVT that these stories are intended to have a humorous cast. This is not, however, to dismiss them as mere entertainments. We already noted that it is unusual for the Gemara to simply retell a story found in the very Mishnah under inquiry. We should also look at it from the other side and recognize that perhaps one reason this doesn't happen often is that it is quite unusual for the Mishnah itself to indulge in such extended *aggadeta*. To put it another way, it seems that the Mishnah really wanted to tell this story, and then the Gemara really wanted to tell its own version too. This suggests that there is something important at work in the Choni circle-making story, although it's not absolutely clear what or why.

Reading the story with open eyes, we find it reflects some ambivalence toward Choni, the charismatic miracle-worker, who is in a way backhandedly compared with Elijah the Prophet in the Gemara's telling of Shimon b. Shetach's rebuke. God grants Choni's wishes, but in twisted, genie-like fashion. Ben Shetach acknowledges his effectiveness, but castigates his methods.

²³ This expression is not found in the standard Vilna edition, which reads simply "he died." See note 8, above.

The sages ultimately fail to recognize him. One additional note: within our story, Choni is described as resolving all the *halachic* difficulties in the *beit midrash*; yet, nowhere in the Talmud is his name cited in connection with an actual *halachic* ruling. Are the sages, unwittingly in his presence, remembering him fondly, or in fact further mocking him? If we carefully consider the timing, we will note that Ben Shetach, who lived at the time that the Pharisees were surpassing the Sadducees and consolidating their leadership, disapproved but could not actually ban Choni. Seventy years and two generations of rabbinic leadership later, Choni awakens in the time of Hillel and Shammai, a golden age of the *Tannaim*, where his actual form is unrecognized and his memory has been co-opted as a proto-rabbi, not working miracles, but answering *shailos* in the yeshiva.

On the surface, the two stories – particularly the circle-making story – seem to treat Choni with regard. Yet, on a deeper reading, there seems to be a biting and mocking humor presenting Choni as something of a clown, as literally an anachronism in his own lifetime before dying sad and lonely because he can't fit in to the new environment. Choni, like Elijah, is a miracle-worker with an outsized personality. Just as Elijah's style of prophecy gave way to the later prophets who were more speech-givers and moral exhorters rather than hairy men of action, Choni's style of charismatic religious leadership must give way to sagely rabbis and their *halachic* debates. The Choni stories, read in this way, belong alongside the famous "Oven of Achnai" story²⁴ which expresses that miracles and heavenly voices do not determine *halachah* because "Torah is not in the heavens." Such stories would have gained even greater significance in Palestine as Christianity grew in stature and the rabbis disputed with early Christians who attempted to establish the verity of their new religion on the basis of purported miracles by their divinized hero.

²⁴ Baba Metzia 59a-b

Chapter 4. Rabbis behaving badly

A. Rabbah slaughters Rabbi Zeira

Said Rava, "A man is obligated to inebriate [himself] on Purim until he can't distinguish (עד דלא ידע) between 'cursed is Haman' and 'blessed is Mordecai.'"

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira made a Purim feast together. They got drunk. Rabbah arose and cut R. Zeira's throat. The next day, he prayed for him and revived him. The next year, he said to him, "Will the master come to make a Purim feast together [again]?" He replied, "A miracle doesn't always happen."

– Megillah 7b

The delightful text above follows upon a discussion of Purim customs which covers gifts to the poor (מתנות לאביונים), food baskets to friends (משלוח מנות), and finally comes to "*adloyada*" (עד דלא ידע), the custom/commandment to get drunk on Purim.

Cutting someone's throat is never proper party etiquette, and miraculously reviving the dead is outside of normal experience, but even with these two whoppers on the table, the most striking violation in this short exchange is the very idea of asking someone to a party next year when the last one ended in an attempted homicide. Of course, Rabbah successfully revives R. Zeira

through prayer, and R. Zeira seems to learn to be more careful,²⁵ so everything works out benignly in the end. Note also that the reputedly humorless (see below) R. Zeira's quip could be considered quite witty in the Roman tradition, although it too could be delivered in dry deadpan by one who never laughed in his life.

This little tale exemplifies the mitzvah expounded by Rava to get drunk on Purim (although Rava follows Rabbah and R. Zeira, so they did not get the idea from him), hopefully teaching us not to overdo it in the process. Simultaneously, it teaches us the general principle not to rely on miracles.²⁶ Perhaps it is seen as a specific lesson for those who expect miraculous protection if they do harm or are harmed in performance of this or another mitzvah.

B. Fishy questions

Rabbi Jeremiah inquired of Rabbi Zeira, "According to Rabbi Meir, who ruled, '[A miscarriage resembling] a domestic animal in a woman's womb is a valid birth [and the woman is legally considered to have borne a child], what is the law if its father accepted a token of betrothal for it?' What practical difference could [such an absurd betrothal] make? It could make its sister forbidden [to the man who betrothed it]. Does this mean to

²⁵ It is generally, and reasonably, assumed that it is Rabbah inviting and R. Zeira wisely refusing the second invitation. However, the typical Talmudic "he said to him" (אמר ליה) also makes it possible to read the other way around, which would mean that R. Zeira, the victim, was ready to give it another go, while it was Rabbah who was wisely mortified by the experience and refused to put himself back in position to do harm to his colleague.

²⁶ cf. BT Taanit 20b and Shabbat 32a: **R. Jannai said: a man should never stand in a place of danger and say, "a miracle will be done for me." Perhaps a miracle will not be done for him; and if you suppose that a miracle is indeed done for him, it is deducted from his merits. R. Chanan derived it from the verse (Gen. 32:11) "I am not worthy of (lit. I am too little for) all the kindnesses and all the truth..." (Read midrashically as, I am *diminished* by all the kindnesses, i.e. rescuing miracles.)**

say it could live?! (A man is only forbidden to marry his wife's sister while the wife is alive.) But didn't Rav Judah quote Rav that, "R. Meir only ruled thus because [if born] from its own species it is viable," [but not in the case of a deformed human miscarriage]?

Said Rav Acha bar Jacob, "To such extent did R. Jeremiah try to bring R. Zeira to laughter, but he did not laugh."

– Niddah 23a

Mishnah: A fledgling found within fifty cubits [of a dovecote] belongs to the owner of the cote; beyond fifty cubits, it belongs to the finder.

Gemara: [...] Rabbi Jeremiah asked, "If one foot is within fifty cubits, and one foot is beyond fifty cubits, what is the ruling?" For this, they threw R. Jeremiah out of the *Beit Midrash*.

– Bava Batra 23b

Rabbi Jose ben Taddai of Tiberias asked this question of **Rabban Gamliel**: "I am permitted [to marry] my wife, yet I am forbidden her daughter; [in the case of] another man's wife, from whom I am forbidden, is it not logical that I should be forbidden her daughter?" (Rendering all marriages forbidden so long as the bride's mother is married!)

He answered, "Go explain to me the high priest, of whom it is written (Lev. 21:14), 'only a virgin of his own kin may he take to wife,' and I will explain to you all the rest of Israel.

Furthermore, we don't reason to a conclusion that uproots the word of the Torah." And so Rabban Gamliel excommunicated him.

– Derech Eretz Rabbah 1:6

Each of the above texts fits naturally into the discussion at hand where it appears. The passage from Niddah is part of the Gemara's discussion of a Mishnah concerning ritual requirements relating to a radically deformed miscarriage. The determination of whether a pregnancy which is not seriously viable "counts" as a birth, especially if it is a first pregnancy, can affect the status of the mother for future issues such as levitate marriage (if her husband dies) or redemption of a firstborn (if she next bears a son). Rabbi Jeremiah, however, takes the discussion in an unexpected direction by assuming that if the birth is "valid" (as far as the mother's status), then the product is a "valid" child for other purposes. Likewise, his question in Bava Batra is a direct, if unexpected, reaction to the Mishnah at hand, as quoted with it above.

Derech Eretz Rabbah is a minor tractate of the Talmud whose opening section deals with forbidden marriages or relations (עריות). As the content quickly diverges into other matters, the Vilna Gaon has proposed that the early section should really belong to *kallah* or *kallah rabbati*, the preceding tractates, which deal with issues of marriage generally. Regardless, the question of R. Jose, like those of R. Jeremiah, is topical, albeit rather unexpected.

The violative aspects here are straightforward as these questions are in all cases quite ridiculous. Both of R. Jeremiah's questions seem to revolve around reading a ruling in such a hyper-literal fashion that there is a *reductio ad absurdum*, except that the intended meanings are so naturally understood that it is instead R. Jeremiah's questions – and perhaps the process

of Talmudic inquiry itself – which become absurd. R. Jose likewise seems to ironically marry cleverness and foolishness, as, like the *scholastikos* we met earlier (page 11, above), he produces a very clever *a fortiori* (קל וחומר) argument, but seems not to understand the familiar familial relationships we take for granted.

Conversely, the questions are so farfetched that they are unthreatening, except to the integrity of the logical *halachic* process, and immediately amusing. There is no serious concern that anyone will betroth a beast-like miscarriage, find a bird with one foot in and one foot out of an imaginary 50-cubit limit, or ban essentially all marriage according to R. Jose's logic. After a brief attempt to find a useful purpose for R. Jeremiah's question in Niddah, the Talmud itself dismisses it as a joke. In the other two cases, the punishment of the rabbis for their impertinent questions is part of the story, so any potential harm to *halachic* integrity is mitigated; indeed, particularly in R. Jeremiah's case, it seems to me that the passage becomes funny not with the silly question itself, but upon the revelation that he was kicked out for it.

Despite the silliness, there is a serious side to be found in these episodes, particularly those involving R. Jeremiah. In Bava Batra and elsewhere, he shows a pattern of being dissatisfied or uncomfortable with arbitrary numbers and boundaries. If he were alive today, he would ask what difference if he drives 55 mph or 56, or why his carry-on bag may weigh so much and not one pound more. This is a legitimate critique, but ultimately not a winning one. The benefit of clear boundaries outweighs the potential unfairness of an arbitrary limit.

Nevertheless, the punishments show that their leadership and colleagues were not amused by these rabbis' silly questions. Shimon ben Shetach backed off his threat of excommunication in deference to a display of Divine favor (see chapter 3 above), but no miraculous rains legitimated

the clownish displays we have examined in this section. In R. Jeremiah's case, there is a debate among the *Rishonim* (medieval sages) as to whether the offense in his question was of frivolity or impertinence. Rashi takes the view that his question was simply an unserious annoyance, wasting the rabbis' time and diminishing the dignity of the academy.²⁷ Rashi's grandson Rabbeinu Tam, however, introduces a new factor by asserting that in fact R. Jeremiah's question was meant to ridicule the opinion that fledging birds only hop up to fifty cubits from their home cote.²⁸ Although voiced in the Gemara by Mar 'Ukba, a very early *Amora*, this appears to be the basis for the Mishnah's ruling. In Tam's view, then, it is not for general levity but for this specific mockery of the Mishnah's underlying assumption of fact that Jeremiah was punished.

Interestingly, another encounter between R. Jeremiah and R. Zeira is recorded in Berachot 30b, in which the latter chastises his colleague for undue levity, to which the former responds that he is wearing *tefillin*, the implication apparently being that the phylacteries will restrain him from going too far. Whether in service of a legitimate viewpoint on the philosophy of legislating boundaries, or whether simply by virtue of jovial personality, R. Jeremiah and R. Jose tested and found the limits of frivolity in the *Beit Midrash*.

C. Fishy answers

Rabbi Judah said (in a *braita*), "One may not be considered a *ben sorer umoreh* (a rebellious son, to be executed) if his mother is not like his father in voice, appearance,

²⁷ Rashi on Bava Batra 23b s.v. ועל דא אפקוהו.

²⁸ End of the Tosafot ad loc. s.v. ועד דא אפקוהו לרבי ירמיה מבי מדרשא. Tam says that if the sages say a bird can only hop fifty cubits, then not even one foot could be over that limit.

and stature. Why so? Because the verse says (Deut. 21:20), 'He does not listen to our voice.' Since we require the voice to be alike, we also require the appearance and stature to be alike." With whom does the following *braita* agree? "A *ben sorer umoreh* there never was and never will be! Why was [the law] written? [So that you might] learn it and receive reward." It agrees with R. Judah. – Or, if you want, say it agrees with Rabbi Simeon, as it is taught in this *braita*: "Said R. Simeon, 'Because he ate a *tartemar* of meat and drank half a *lug* of Italian wine (a Mishnaic description of *ben sorer* behavior), his father and mother will take him out to stone him?! Rather, it never [really] happened and never will. So why was it written? Learn it and receive reward.'" – [But] Rabbi Jonathan said, "I saw [a child who was declared a *ben scorer umoreh*] and I sat on his grave."

With whom does the following *braita* agree? "An *ir nidachat* (an entire city seduced into idolatry, to be destroyed) there never was and never will be! Why was it written? Learn it and receive reward." It agrees with Rabbi Eliezer, as is taught in this *braita*: "Any city with even a single *mezuzah* in it cannot be considered a 'seduced city.' Why not? The verse says (Deut. 13:17), 'you shall gather all its spoil into its main street and burn it in fire,' but this would be impossible if there were a *mezuzah* because it is [also] written (Deut. 12:4), 'you shall not do so to the Lord your God.' [But] R. Jonathan said, "I saw [a seduced city] and I sat on its ruins."

With whom does the following *braita* agree? "A *bayit menuga'* (a leprous house, to be destroyed) there never was and never will be! Why was it written? Learn it and receive reward." It agrees with Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Simeon, as we learn in the following mishnah (Nega'im 12:3): "R. Eliezer b. R. Simeon says, 'A house is never unclean unless [a leprous spot] is visible, [the size of] two beans, on two stones in two walls at a corner,

with a length like two beans and a width like a bean." What is R. Eliezer's reasoning? [In the Torah] it is written "wall" and also "walls" (see Lev. 14:37); what wall is like [two] walls? You must say it [describes] a corner. (All told, the circumstances described are considered impossibly unlikely.) [But] it is taught in a *braita*, "Said Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Zadok, 'There was a place within a Sabbath's walk (2000 cubits) of Gaza which was called [in Aramaic] The Leprous Ruins.' Said Rabbi Simeon of Acco Village, 'Once I went to Galilee and saw a marked-off place where they said leprous stones were thrown!'"

– Sanhedrin 71a

The tractate Sanhedrin deals with the proceedings of Jewish courts, particularly in regard to criminal and capital proceedings. Its eighth chapter deals primarily with the case of the *ben sorer umoreh*, the incorrigibly rebellious son (leading to a more general concluding excursus on criminals who may be killed in the act in order to prevent the crime – would-be murderers and rapists, for instance – which is a discussion with widespread ramifications in Jewish jurisprudence and ethics). The Mishnah in this chapter successively limits the application of the law of *ben sorer umoreh*, generating the question addressed in the Gemara above: is the law ultimately so limited that in fact it could never be carried out? The same question with regard to idolatrous cities and leprous houses is appended by association, though broader discussion of those topics is situated elsewhere in the Talmud.

There is a discernible subtext to the discussion above as well. Even absent the rabbinic restrictions, these three laws – the rebellious son, idolatrous city, and leprous house – seem, from the rabbis' perspective in history, to be both practically unlikely and morally questionable. On the practical side, as R. Simeon asked, are any parents really going to bring even the most

atrocious child before the court for execution? Is it truly possible among a fractious Jewish polity under foreign domination that even a rotten city's neighbors will gang up to destroy it? Can a skin disease actually spread to the walls of a house,²⁹ and do the priests of the Talmudic age know how to identify it? On the moral front, do we really approve of parents – whose parenting may well have contributed to their son's noxious behavior – throwing up their hands and resorting to judicial filicide? Do we truly accept that a city can be so totally corrupted that everyone and everything in it merits destruction (and should we not, like our father Abraham, defend it anyway³⁰)? Are we actually comfortable depriving a family of home and property because the house has a "medical" condition? As the rabbis progressively restrict these laws down to the vanishing point, they may simply be interpreting the text as they understand it, but one might also understand them to be legislating away some Torah laws which discomfited them morally (and seemed unlikely to be applied anyway), simultaneously redefining their original purpose as having been all along theoretical and abstract.

The violation here comes in the unlikelihood and incongruity of R. Jonathan's claim to have seen – sat on, actually – something all the other sages say (by their silence) never happened. This humorous preposterousness is only amplified when the same R. Jonathan makes a remarkably parallel claim a second time. R. Jonathan quite literally and vividly asserts that his *tuchas* (posterior) knows more about these matters than the eyes, ears, and minds of the entire

²⁹ The question of "leprosy" (צרעת) spreading to a building leads some to suggest that, at least with regard to structures, the biblical word may refer to a poisonous fungus like Black Mold. (See e.g. Heller, Heller, and Sasson. "Mold: "tsara'at," Leviticus, and the history of a confusion". *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 46 (4), 2003.) However, even if this was what the Torah intended, it seems the rabbis understood it to be a skin disease as is generally understood today, and were at pains to make sense of its extension to structures. The Mishnah's first comment on "leprosy" of a house (Nega'im 12:1) is that gentile homes are not susceptible to it, suggesting the rabbis viewed it as metaphysical and perhaps even mythical. (See Nega'im chapters 12 and 13 for primary discussion of "leprous houses" generally.)

³⁰ See Genesis 18:17 ff.

rabbinic assembly! The third case is only slightly less tightly parallel, involving a third ostensibly theoretical law ("Learn it and receive reward"), this time disputed by two essentially secondhand hearsay reports of its execution. The unlikelihood, outrageousness, and parallelism combine to suggest tall tales.

These isolated reports, measured against the overwhelming weight of silent testimony of all the other sages who have never encountered or heard of such a case, seem too farfetched to be credible or even very serious. Tall tales are technically lies, but they lack the threatening character of typical lies because their very outsized nature calls immediate attention to the falsehood and incongruity. Without the danger of being fooled, we find them immediately and purely benign.³¹

It seems that R. Jonathan and his two colleagues object to the notion of purely theoretical laws, apparently even to the point of fabricating their testimonies to assert that these three laws have had concrete application. But which move is bolder, for these three rabbis to defend these three laws' practicality with tall tales, or for their colleagues to legislate Torah laws out of existence and declare them merely theoretical? That is to say that, in a certain perspective, R. Jonathan and friends are trading their personal integrity for the integrity of Torah as they see it. Moreover,

³¹ At the other end of the spectrum from tall tales, too big and obvious to be threatening, are "white lies," too small (and generally well-intentioned) to harm. It's those medium-sized lies, plausible enough to pass, but sizable enough to hide damaging truths, where the danger and offense lie.

This strikes me as remarkably similar to the "uncanny valley" effect, a phenomenon in robotics, animation, and simulation wherein it has been observed that people will easily accept a completely unrealistic visual representation of a person, such as a cartoon character, or of course a completely realistic simulation like the best computer graphic imagery; but when the representation is highly realistic overall, yet detectably "wrong" somehow (typically meaning near-photorealistic when still, but unable to realistically model subtle movements as of eyes, hair, and skin), like older or cheaper CGI, then many find the effect disconcerting and repulsive. The animated film "The Polar Express" is widely regarded as trapped in the uncanny valley.

particularly in the two cases involving R. Jonathan, the moral dimension seems to be in play. If Rabbis Judah, Simeon, and Eliezer, who declare the laws of the rebellious son and idolatrous city to be theoretical and unenforceable, are also hinting that they find the laws in their original biblical state to be immoral or distasteful, then R. Jonathan seems to be countering, between the lines, that he does not believe Torah laws can be immoral or distasteful. If this reading is fair, then it reflects a deep debate about morality: does God's will, as refracted through the Torah and its rabbinic interpretation, define what is moral, or can a Torah law be, or become, immoral if it seems odious to contemporary senses?

It is worth asking how R. Jonathan's fishy answers differ from the fishy questions we observed from R. Jeremiah in the previous section; recall that R. Jeremiah was censured for his question about the bird, while no punishment or even criticism of R. Jonathan is recorded. This question cannot be answered definitively from what we know, but several possibilities seem reasonable. It could be that Jonathan's underlying critique (regarding theoretical and/or immoral laws) was taken seriously, while Jeremiah's (regarding arbitrary limits) was not. If so, this could be because Jonathan was seen as defending the Torah's coherence, while Jeremiah's attitude does not defend but rather attacks many Torah and rabbinic laws. Alternately, the difference could have more to do with personality; we saw that R. Jeremiah seemed to be jovial and lighthearted generally, so perhaps when he chose to make his point through mockery and silliness, the point itself was lost. Or, he may have already burnt out his colleagues' patience for his antics. If R. Jonathan was regarded as a more serious figure overall, he may have been able to make his point effectively through a little silliness in these two isolated cases.

D. This is Torah, and I must learn

It was taught in a *braita*: "Said Rabbi Akiba, 'Once I followed Rabbi Joshua into the privy, and I learned three things from him: I learned that one does not relieve oneself* facing east and west, but north and south; I learned that one does not disrobe* standing, but [already] sitting; and I learned that one does not wipe with the right [hand], but with the left.' [R. Akiba's student] Ben 'Azzai said to him, 'Were you so insolent to your teacher?' He answered, 'It is Torah, and I must learn.'"³²

It was taught in a *braita*: "Ben Azzai says, 'Once I followed R. Akiba into the privy, and I learned three things from him: I learned that one does not relieve oneself* facing east and west, but north and south; I learned that one does not disrobe* standing, but [already] sitting; and I learned that one does not wipe with the right [hand], but with the left.' [His colleague] Rabbi Judah said to him, 'Were you so insolent to your teacher?' He answered, 'It is Torah, and I must learn.'"

³² The two asterisks in this paragraph (and the following, which is almost identical except the names) denote points of difference between my translation and that of Soncino (Berakoth, 388; Maurice Simon is the primary translator of this tractate), which I feel merit comment. In the first instance, Soncino gives "I learnt that one does not *sit* east and west but north and south" (emphasis added). I believe this to be based on understanding the Hebrew נפנין to mean turning or facing, which in fact it does mean. However, the Hebrew root פנה can mean both turn/face and vacate/empty; in the *nif'al* form, as here, it is attested in rabbinic literature meaning both to turn and specifically to relieve oneself (Jastrow 1188). I would suggest the original intent is actually a double-entendre on these two meanings, explicitly indicating the proper facing while defecating.

The second discrepancy involves a more significant difference in understanding. Soncino (ibid.) renders "I learnt that one *evacuates* not standing but sitting." Here the Hebrew word is נפרעין, which Jastrow defines as "to uncover one's self (for a human need)," in fact citing this very instance as an example (Jastrow 1235). Not only is this more consistent with the overall meanings of the root פרע in its various forms, it creates a more consistent and meaningful understanding of the passage. Of the three observations in the toilet, the facing during voiding was the point of discussion on which this *ma'aseh* was brought as evidence, the hand used for wiping is discussed and several explanations offered immediately after the quoted selection. If the middle observation is posture during evacuation, then it calls out for some explanation which is not forthcoming; if it is rather when to disrobe, the reason is self-evident: modesty. Furthermore, after the discussion of wiping, the Gemara continues with *meimrot* and discussion about modesty in the bathroom.

Rav Kahana once went and lay under Rav's bed. He heard him chatting and sporting and attending to his needs [with his wife]. [Kahana] exclaimed, "It seems as if Abba's³³ mouth has not sipped this broth before!" [Rav] said to him, "Kahana, are you here? Get out! This is not decent behavior!" (לאו אורח ארעא)³⁴ [In response,] he quoted, "It is Torah, and I must learn."³⁵

– Berachot 62a

Rabbi [Judah the Prince] asked Rabbi Joshua ben Korcha, "How have you lived so long?" He replied, "Do you [wish to] cut off my life?" Rabbi answered him, "It is Torah, and I must learn." So he told him, "In all my life, I never looked at the image of an evil man..."

– Megillah 28a

The Mishnah in the ninth (and concluding) chapter of Berachot addresses blessings for various particular places and occasions. Knowing that the Talmudic discussion will wind up in the toilet, one might suppose that *asher yatzar* (אשר יצר), the blessing recited after using the toilet, is the point of departure for our selection, but this is not so. Rather, perhaps inspired by the thread of

³³ Abba Aricha is Rav's full personal name.

³⁴ This is possibly a pun or double-entendre as *orach ar'a* (אורח ארעא), equivalent to *derech erez* (דרך ארץ) in Hebrew, can mean common decency as appears to be the plain meaning here, but can also be a euphemism for sexual intercourse (among some other possibilities).

³⁵ This third episode is not part of the *braita*, as its language is Aramaic and its characters Amoraic.

blessings related to locations (a place where miracles took place, a former place of idol worship, the ocean, a capital city), the Mishnah somewhat abruptly turns to matters of respect for the Temple Mount, beginning with the assertion that one must not show disrespect toward the Temple's eastern gate as it leads directly (through a series of internal gates) into the Holy of Holies. The discussion in the Gemara tacitly understands the show of disrespect to mean defecating toward the Temple Mount (from any direction), but questions whether the prohibition applies only in sight of the Temple Mount or only when the Temple itself is standing.

Rabbi Akiba's opinion is that the prohibition applies in all places (and implicitly in all times). Our *braita* is brought to show that Rabbi Akiba learned this by observing his teacher Rabbi Joshua, and practiced it in his own life as observed by his own student Ben Azzai. In addition to the weight of R. Akiba's reputation, the story bears resonance and gravity with respect to the question at hand because R. Joshua is a survivor of the destruction of the Second Temple, as demonstrated vividly in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 4:5, which describes him observing the fresh ruins of the Temple with his own teacher, Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai. The third incident is obviously connected by the close observation of the master's personal practices, outside the expected bounds of academia – and propriety! – and by the apologia "this is Torah, and I must learn" (תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך). I have appended the fourth appearance of this expression, from Megillah, in which the intrusion into the senior's privacy is merely verbal, but obviously crosses a line of superstition about asking such a question.³⁶

³⁶ I am reminded of the delightful 20th century joke about the elderly Jew who is called as a witness in court. To the court stenographer's increasing confusion and consternation, he repeatedly responds to the question of his age with, "*kinahora*, eighty-six." Fortunately, an attorney waiting in the gallery for the next case is a Jew and assures the judge he can elicit an appropriate response from the witness. He asks, "*kinahora*, how old are you?" "Eighty-six."

The violative aspects here are self-evident, and if they were not, the surprised reactions within the stories themselves show that the behaviors are beyond the usual bounds. The offenses are mitigated by the fact that, "it is Torah, and I must learn," particularly as the argument is accepted by the offended parties themselves. To be precise, in the series from *Berachot*, the stories end with "it is Torah," and the assent of the offended parties is assumed from silence (in fact, in the two privy stories, it is not even the "victims" who voice objection); in the *ma'aseh* from Megillah, however, R. Joshua b. Korcha's acceptance of the premise seems clear from the fact that he goes on to give a responsive answer to the offensive question. The benignity of the two privy tales is enhanced by the fact that R. Akiba goes from "offender" to "victim," suggesting both a measure-for-measure karmic justice (מדה כנגד מדה), and that he probably was not predisposed to be offended by the incident.

As noted above, the observations in the first two anecdotes provide support to Rabbi Akiba's contention that the ruling of not evacuating the bowels in the direction of the Temple applies in all places, as it reflects the practice of R. Joshua as well as of Akiba himself. The "incidental" observations that come along with the one "on point" occasion a very brief discussion of the matter of wiping with the left – enough to show that the sages seemingly took it seriously, as several, including Joshua and Akiba, express various opinions as to the reason – and a quite lengthy discussion of toilet etiquette, ironically including a later *ma'aseh* which suggests that it is not proper for two men to share a latrine. Rabbi Judah's question leads to learning a sage's opinion of how he merited a long life. The outlier among the stories is that of Rav and Kahana, where despite the parallel with the other three, no particularly useful knowledge seems to come of the episode, and we might fairly question whether the moral of the story should really be Kahana's assertion that he must learn or Rav's contention that it is indecent.

It is worthy of note that our passage in Berachot follows immediately upon the very famous report of Rabbi Akiba reciting the Shema during his martyrdom. It could of course be entirely coincidental, but I cannot help wondering if the Gemara deliberately turns to a humorous memory of Akiba invading his teacher's privacy in the name of Torah, and later having the tables turned on him by his own student, as a salve to the painful memory of his end.

The discussion of toilet modesty also leads to this gem in the Gemara (Ber. 62a): **A certain eulogizer who was wishing rest to the deceased before Rav Nachman said, "This man was modest in his ways." R. Nachman said to him, "Did you ever go into the toilet together, that you would know whether he was modest or not? As it is taught in a *braita*, 'one may not be called modest unless he is modest in the toilet.'" What difference did it make to R. Nachman? Because it was taught in a *braita*, "just as the dead are held to account [for their sins],³⁷ so are the eulogizers [who unduly praise them] and those who respond [approvingly] after them."**

Conclusions:

There are many passages in the Talmud that various commenters, some scholarly, some not, have found to have a humorous cast. We have examined only a very few herein. Whether a reader finds humor in them as presented, particularly in the language of carefully precise translation rather than the free storytelling style of a good joke, is a matter of personal taste. However, through the identification and examination of violation and benignity in the various

³⁷ The same word, נפרעין, is used here in the sense of "called to account" or "punished" as was used to mean disrobing in the earlier text which brought about the discussion of latrine etiquette. This may be entirely coincidental, or a deliberate back reference.

tales and episodes, we can say with some degree of objectivity that, at least according to Benign Violation Theory, the raw material of humor is found in them regardless of whether any individual's funny bone is tickled by the telling.

More importantly, this analysis allows us to hypothesize that the same raw material was present and amounted to humor in ancient times as well. We have seen from our limited examination of Classical Roman humor just how difficult it can be to decipher an ancient joke and unpeel its layers: the errors in transmission, the language itself, the cultural milieu, the lost referents. Yet we also observed that, for the most part, we can laugh at the same essential jokes, repackaged in our own context if not always in theirs. Taken together, these data allow us to suggest that the Talmudic sages would not be shocked or disappointed to find that we laugh at certain stories; they too likely had a good laugh at the same tales.

Simultaneously, our examination has largely confirmed the intuitive sense that the Talmud would not waste precious verbiage on "mere" jokes. While some humorous anecdotes, particularly those that digress far from the topic at hand, may perhaps be included mostly to add color and personality to the memory of rabbinic figures who were colorful and humorous in life, we have seen that, at least in our selection, the humor of and about the sages does generally serve the Talmudic discussion. Indeed, making a point with good humor often makes it more strongly and memorably than a simple statement, just as we often see the rabbis choose to employ a parable rather than simply state its moral. Indeed, if we broaden our definition of humor from funny stories and quips as examined herein (in other words, the narrowly joke-like) to include clever wordplay, puns, and double-entendres, which fall under the definition of humor in the rubric of BVT, I venture to suggest it's a rare page of Talmud that *lacks* humor – the more so if we further accept Cicero's conception of a timely quote of a familiar saying or verse as a form of humor.

Thus, importantly, the finding that there does appear to be deliberate humor in the Talmud and other sources does not diminish the authority or intellectual heft of the Rabbinic tradition. Rather, the observation of humor in the sources should only deepen our appreciation for the rabbis' mastery of their craft and deployment of all the tools at their disposal to make their lessons memorable both for new students, and for those tasked with memorizing and repeating texts and tales in those days. If it also provides us as modern students with some amusement and pleasure in our learning, I hardly think the sages or the Holy Blessed One would object.

Addendum: Some additional Rabbinic amusements

Rav was [once] taking leave of Rabbi Chiyya. [R. Chiyya] said to him, "May the Merciful One save you from that which is worse than death." But is there something worse than death? He went out and searched [his sources] and found (Eccles. 7:26): "And I find the woman more bitter than death..." Rav was constantly annoyed by his wife. When he said, "Make me lentils," she made him peas, [but if he asked for] peas, she made him lentils. When his son Chiyya grew up, he reversed [his father's requests, so that Rav came out getting what he wanted]. [Rav] said to him, "Your mother has improved." [Chiyya] told him, "It is I who reverse [the orders] to her." [Rav] said to him, "This is [an example of] what people say: 'Your offspring teaches you reason.' [But,] you should not do this [anymore], as it is said (Jer. 9:4): 'They have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves...'"

Rabbi Chiyya was constantly annoyed by his wife. [Yet,] whenever he found something [for her], he wrapped it in his scarf and brought it to her. Rav said to him, "Does she not

annoy the master?!" He answered him, "It is enough for us that they raise our children and save us from sin."

Rav Judah was reading with his son Rav Isaac (Eccles. 7:26): "And I find the woman more bitter than death." [R. Isaac asked,] "Like whom?" "Like your mother." But didn't R. Judah teach his son R. Isaac, "A man finds happiness only with his first wife, as it is said (Prov. 5:18): 'Let your fountain be blessed, and have joy from the wife of your youth,'" and he asked, "Like whom?" "Like your mother." She was easily angered, but easily appeased with a word.³⁸

What is an example of a "bad wife?" Said Abaye, "She prepares a tray for [her husband] and prepares her mouth for him too." Rava said, "She prepares a tray for him and turns her back on him."

[...]

In the West (i.e. Israel), when a man married a woman, they would ask, "found or find?" Found, as is written (Prov. 18:22): "Who found a wife found a good thing." Find, as is written (Eccles. 7:26): "And I find the woman more bitter than death."

Said Rava, it is a mitzvah to divorce (לגרש) a bad wife, as it is written (Prov. 22:10): "Expel (גרש) a scoffer and contention departs, dispute and disgrace cease."

– Yevamot 63a-b

³⁸ See also Sanhedrin 22a, where the complimentary comment precedes the critical.

"*This* is the offering of Aaron and his sons..." (Lev. 6:13). Rabbi Levi opened his discourse: "For God is Judge, *this* one He debases and *this* one He exalts" (Ps. 75:8). A Roman matron asked Rabbi Jose bar Chalafta, "In how many days did the Holy Blessed One create His world?" He answered, "In six days, as is written (Ex. 31:17): 'For in six days the Lord created the heavens and earth...'" She asked, "From then until now, what does He do?" He answered, "He pairs couples, [saying] 'This one's wife is [allotted] to him; this one's daughter to that one; (this one's money [in dowry] to that).'" She declared, "This even I can do; I have a number of male slaves and a number of female slaves, and I can pair them up in a mere moment." [R. Jose] said, "If it [seems] easy in your eyes, [know that] it is as difficult for the Holy Blessed One as was the parting of the Reed Sea."

He left her and went away. What did she do? She sent for a thousand male slaves and a thousand females, and stood them in rows. She told them, "This one shall marry that, this one with that..." She paired them off in one night. *In the morning, they came to her: this one with his head split open, this one with his eyeball dislocated, this one with his elbow smashed, this one with his knee fractured; this one saying, "I don't want [him]," this one saying, "I don't want [her]."³⁹

Immediately, she sent for R. Jose b. Chalafta. She said to him, "Rabbi, your Torah is true, pleasing, and praiseworthy; you were right in all you said." He replied, "Did I not tell you

³⁹ Between the two asterisks, the primary language is Palestinian Aramaic, with some Hebrew words. Outside the marks, the language is Hebrew with occasional Aramaic.

that even if it is easy in your eyes, it is as hard for the Holy Blessed One as splitting the Reed Sea? As it is said (Ps. 68:7): 'God settles 'singles' into a household, and brings out prisoners in prosperity (בְּכוֹשָׁרוֹת – a *hapax legomenon* of unclear meaning).'⁴⁰ What is *ba-kosharot*? Weeping (בְּכִי) and song (שִׁירוֹת). Who wants (their mate) sings; who doesn't want (their mate) cries. And what does the Holy Blessed One do? He pairs them up [even] against their will.

– Leviticus Rabbah 8:1 (see also Bereshit Rabbah 68:4 for the same story with minor variations)

A man once said to his wife, '*Konam* (a pledge or oath) that you benefit not from me, until you shew aught beautiful in yourself to R. Ishmael son of R. Jose.' Said he (R. Ishmael) to them: 'Perhaps her head is beautiful?' – 'It is round,' they replied.

'Perhaps her hair is beautiful?' – 'It is like stalks of flax.'

'Perhaps her eyes are beautiful?' – 'They are bleared.'

'Perhaps her nose is beautiful?' – 'It is swollen.'

'Perhaps her lips are beautiful?' – 'They are thick.'

'Perhaps her neck is beautiful?' – It is squat.'

'Perhaps her abdomen is beautiful?' – 'It protrudes.'

'Perhaps her feet are beautiful?' – 'They are as broad as those of a duck.'

'Perhaps her name is beautiful?' – 'It is *liklukith*.' (Filthy).

Said he to them, 'She is fittingly called *liklukith*, since she is repulsive through her defects'; and so he permitted her [to her husband].

⁴⁰ The verse is taken to suggest a parity between its first clause, understood as finding wives for singles, and its second clause, setting prisoners free with prosperity, which aptly describes the exodus from Egypt. The same prooftext is used to make the same point on the first page of Sotah (2a), where it is attributed ultimately to Rabbi Jochanan. However, R. Jose b. Chalafta, star of our ma'ase, precedes R. Jochanan by about two generations.

A certain Babylonian went up to the Land of Israel and took a wife [there]. 'Boil me two [cows'] feet,' he ordered, and she boiled him two lentils, which infuriated him with her. (Rashi informs us this misunderstanding was caused by his Babylonian accent.) The next day he said, 'Boil me a *griwa*' (an unreasonably large serving of lentils, apparently meant to mock or reprimand her for boiling just two beans previously, not intended seriously), so she boiled him a *griwa*. 'Go and bring me two *bezunī*' (the word could mean melons or candles, but the context should imply the edible choice); so she went and brought him two candles. 'Go and break them on the head of the *baba*' (the threshold). Now Baba b. Buta was sitting on the threshold, engaged in judging in a lawsuit. So she went and broke them on his head. Said he to her, 'What is the meaning of this that thou hast done?' — She replied, 'Thus my husband did order me.' 'Thou hast performed thy husband's will,' he rejoined; 'may the Almighty bring forth from thee two sons like Baba b. Buta.'

Nedarim 66b (translation of Soncino; my notes in parentheses).

When R. Ishmael son of R. Jose and R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon met, one could pass through with a yoke of oxen under them and not touch them (because both were legendarily fat). Said a certain [Roman] matron to them, 'Your children are not yours!' (because you are too fat to successfully impregnate women.) They replied, 'Theirs [sc. our wives'] is greater than ours.' (That is, "our wives are fatter than we are.") '[But this proves my allegation] all the more!' [She observed]. Some say, they answered thus: 'For as a man is, so is his strength' (Judges 8:21). Others say, they answered her thus: 'Love suppresses (overcomes) the flesh.' But why should they have answered her

at all; is it not written, Answer not a fool according to his folly? (Proverbs 26:4) — To permit no stigma upon their children.

R. Johanan said: The (penis)^{*41} of R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was as a (goat-skin bag)^{**42} of nine kabs capacity. R. papa said: R. Johanan's (penis)* was as a (skin)** containing five kabs; others say, three kabs. That of R. Papa himself was as [large as] the wicker-work baskets of Harpania.

R. Johanan said: I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem's men of outstanding beauty. He who desires to see R. Johanan's beauty, let him take a silver goblet as it emerges from the crucible, fill it with the seeds of red pomegranate, encircle its brim with a chaplet of red roses, and set it between the sun and the shade: its lustrous glow is akin to R. Johanan's beauty.

[...]

R. Johanan used to go and sit at the gates of the *mikweh*. 'When the daughters of Israel ascend from the bath,' said he, 'let them look upon me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I.'⁴³

⁴¹ * Soncino gives "waist," but this not a supportable translation for איברא/איבריה. Jastrow offers that the word may mean "meal" here, but also provides what is almost certainly the correct translation, "*membrum genitale*."

See Hyam Maccoby's discussion of the issue at Maccoby 26-27.

⁴² Soncino gives "bottle" which is not unreasonable, but the image of the wine-skin that expands as it fills is probably part of the intended meaning here.

⁴³ There was a belief, from the biblical period until at least the Middle Ages, that the qualities of a child were influenced by what the parents saw and thought about before and during coitus. See Trachtenberg 186-187.

Bava Metzi'a 84a (Soncino translation; my notes and changes in parentheses).

R. Joshua says, "A woman wants a *qab*⁴⁴ with sexual satisfaction more than nine *qabs* with abstinence."

from Mishnah Sotah 3:4 (Translation, Neusner 452).

[If] one saw a *koy*⁴⁵ and said, "Lo, I am a Nazir if this is a wild beast."

(Another,) "Lo, I am a Nazir if this is not a wild beast."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if this is a domesticated beast."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if this is not a domesticated beast."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if this is a wild beast and a domesticated beast."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if this is *not* a wild beast and a domesticated beast."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if one of you is a Nazir."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if none of you is a Nazir."

"Lo, I am a Nazir if all of you are Nazirs,"—

⁴⁴ *Kab* in Soncino's transliteration above (בָּר). Neusner adds "[of food]" which is in fact the common understanding of this statement: a woman would rather her husband is a good provider of sex than of food/income. However, in light of the usage of *kab/qab* in the Bava Metzi'a passage above, Hyam Maccoby observes that it is possible that the measure had a known genital association in common parlance. If so, then R. Joshua is in fact saying that women prefer a frequent sex with a small member to occasion sex with a large member. See Maccoby 89.

⁴⁵ A probably mythical creature, which the rabbis were consequently unable to determine the status of as a wild or domestic animal.

lo, all of them are Nazirs.⁴⁶

Mishnah Nazir 5:7 (Translation, Neusner 439).

⁴⁶ This anonymous conclusion accords with the opinion of Hillel presented after a comparable, if not quite as ridiculous, set of contradictory Nazirite "bets" in Mishnah Nazir 5:5, namely that one who makes a conditional Nazirite vow whose condition isn't or can't be confirmed one way or the other becomes a Nazir. It also accords with the view of Shammai, who said in the previous case, "all are Nazirites." However, it apparently contradicts the opinion of Rabbi Tarfon, who ruled that none are Nazirites in the earlier case.

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