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## **Abba Chilkiyah, His Wife, and the Testing of Rabbinic Boundaries**

### **BT Taanit 23a-b and its parallels**

BT Taanit 23a-b presents the story of Abba Chilkiyah, a non-sage of impressive lineage (he is the grandson of Choni the Circle-Maker), who, like other members of his family, is known to have the talent to pray for rain and to be answered. The story tells of two rabbis who come to ask Abba Chilkiyah to pray for rain on the world's behalf and who find that every action Chilkiyah takes runs contrary to their expectations. When Chilkiyah does eventually pray for rain, his wife prays as well, and it is her prayers that are answered first. In answer to the rabbis' many questions, Chilkiyah finally explains all that has occurred, and he reveals what his wife has done to make her more worthy than he to have merited the rainfall.

Several clear parallels to various elements of the story exist elsewhere in rabbinic literature. One, in the Yerushalmi, describes a chasid and his wife who have a nearly identical set of interactions with rain-seeking rabbis. Another, one of the stories about Beruriah, features an incident parallel to the description of the deeds of Abba Chilkiyah's wife.

Additionally, there are thematic similarities between this story and others in Taanit and across rabbinic literature: stories in which, as we find here, non-sages are meritorious or are granted rain, the protection of women's chastity is honored, and women are portrayed as being primary givers of charity.

What all of these stories have in common is that they deal with outsiders to the normative rabbinic worldview. The pious non-rabbis and the righteous women who are rewarded in these tales do not fit into typical rabbinic, male, scholarly categories. How the rabbis deal with the good deeds and the rewards of these Others reveals much about rabbinic self-definition and self-assessment.

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<sup>1</sup>Abba Chilkiyah was the grandson of Choni the Circle-Maker. When the world needed rain, the rabbis would send for him, and he would ask for mercy, and rain would come.

אבא חלקיה בר בריה דחוני המעגל הוה, וכי מצטריך עלמא למיטרא הוו משדרי רבנן לגביה ובעי רחמי, ואתי מיטרא.

## Analysis

Setting the stage for this tale of a man with an extraordinary talent, we are alerted immediately that Abba Chilkiyah is not a rabbi. Meir Bar-Ilan argues that the title “Abba” indicates that a figure is not a “rav” but, rather, one who is a chasid or “exceptional in miracles”: a miracle- or wonder-worker.<sup>2</sup> From this introduction of the story, we see that the rabbis

1. BT Taanit 23a-b. Translation mine.
2. Meir Bar-Ilan, “Exorcism by rabbis: Talmudic sages and magic,” in *Da’at* 34 (1995), pp. 17-31, as appears at <http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/mag.html>, Hebrew. Bar-Ilan lists six figures from rabbinic literature, including Chilkiyah, who are referred to by the title Abba:

Abba Chilkiyah, son of the daughter of Honi the Circle-Maker: when the world needed rain, he would pray to Heaven and rain would fall (Taanit 23a);

Abba Umna was brought greetings from the Heavenly Yeshivah (Taanit 21b);

Abba Shaul tells that he entered the thigh bone of Og, King of Bashan, which was longer than three *parsa*’s (Niddah 24b);

Abba Yehudah of Antioch used to give much *tzedakah*, and when his property decreased, Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu opened his eyes and revealed a buried treasure (YT Horayot ch. 3, 48a);

For Abba Tachneh the Chasid, Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu made the sun shine (Kohélet

themselves recognize that they sometimes need to go “elsewhere” to find a rain-bringer. They are not always capable of being answered in their prayers for rain, despite their learning; as Tal Ilan writes, “it is obvious that their Torah proficiency is useless in the process of rainmaking.”<sup>3</sup> Although there are tales in *Massekhet Taanit* of rabbis who are fully capable of bringing rain, the immediate string of stories in which Chilkiyah is found—which focus on Choni and his line—suggests that it is not one’s learning that makes one a rain-bringer, nor even one’s piety, but some inborn favor. Choni himself—whom David Daube calls an “enfant terrible”<sup>4</sup> for his God-chastising, “petulant” tactics<sup>5</sup>—is almost certainly not a rabbi, and yet he is granted rain simply for being Choni (BT *Taanit* 23a); likewise, Chanin the Hidden, another of Choni’s rain-bringing grandchildren, is so awkward or shy that he only responds to requests from schoolchildren and customarily hides himself in the outhouse (BT *Taanit* 23b). These are not great scholars but inheritors of some divine favor.

Chilkiyah, then, is an Other to the rabbis who come to seek his aid—and to the rabbis who have recorded the story. His rain-making talent is vital to the world at large—and thus to the

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Rabbah 9:4);

When Abba Hoshayah of Tiri died “they saw his bed hover in the air (Vayikra Rabba 30:1, amud תרץ. In that same source the *tzadik* is also referred to as “Rabbi,” but see the change in the versions there) (ibid., n. 31).

3. Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit: A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 217.
4. David Daube, “Enfant Terrible,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 68:3/4 (July-Oct., 1975), 371.
5. Ibid., 373.

rabbinic community—but from *that* community he is set-apart.

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Abba Chilkiyah, who seems to be a character of general renown because of his lineage, the Chasid of K'far Imi is only discovered by way of a rabbinic dream.

Like Chilkiyah, the Chasid is a non-rabbi (here, a “Chasid” rather than an “Abba”). We learn nothing else of his lineage or life, only that he has the extraordinary ability to pray *u'mitra nachat* (“and rain would fall”).

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Once, when the world needed rain, the rabbis sent a pair of rabbis to him so he would ask for mercy that they might be given rain. They went to his house but did not find him there.

זימנא חדא איצטריך עלמא למיטרא,  
שדור רבנן זוגא דרבנן לגביה למבעי  
רחמי דניתי מיטרא. אזול לביתיה ולא  
אשכחוהו.

Analysis

The point is made here that the normative world—the whole world, in fact—is the rabbinic one. Chilkiyah, we will find, is busy hoeing someone else's land, not in particular need of rain himself (since, presumably, if he needed it, he would have already have prayed for it). The discrepancy between an individual's needs and the needs of the whole world is reminiscent of the tale of R' Chanina b. Dosa, who is distressed when it rains on him at a time when he acknowledges that the world, unlike himself, does need the rain (BT Taanit 24b); likewise, we learn that “the whole world is fed only on account of Chanina,” but Chanina himself is satiated

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6. For full text, see appendix, below.

by only a *kav* of carob from one *Erev Shabbat* to the next.<sup>7</sup> The needs of an individual, we learn, are not necessarily the needs of the world.

We learn here, too, that the rabbis see themselves as responsible for looking out for the world's best interests; they take upon themselves the role as the guardians of the world. Though it is Chilkiyah who is called "Abba," it is the rabbis who take a parental or proprietorial position, acting as lords over an world-wide manor. In Daube's words, the rabbis see themselves as the true adults, caring for an world of children. In their view, they are the only "men," the only ones who "grasp the totality," whereas "Honi and his likes" (presumably this would include Chilkiyah) "stay children even when, by rights, they ought to have grown up."<sup>8</sup>

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The story as told in the Yerushalmi has the additional component of the rabbis speaking with *b'nei beitei* of the Chasid (literally "the children of his house," but most likely meaning "his wife"<sup>9</sup>). Unlike this point in the Chilkiyah story, here the Chasid's wife has a speaking role. Looking back at the Chilkiyah translation, it seems that *beitei* might mean "his wife" there as well, but it seems unlikely given the passive nature of the language in that context.

With regard to the story as told in both sources, the rabbis' lack of interest in the wife at

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7. Interestingly, Chanina b. Dosa is a figure who, along with Choni, was "'rabbimized' in later rabbinic tradition," presumably in an attempt to close "the divide between the rabbis and these charismatics" (Stuart Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique 'Erez Israel* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 209, n. 225).

8. Daube, 374.

9. See Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 218.

this point suggests, according to Jan Fokkelman, that the rabbis are so intent upon finding the rain-bringer that they essentially “overlook his wife.”<sup>10</sup> We will discover later, however, that in the story of the Chasid of K’far Imi, the rabbis were well aware of the wife’s appearance, though no mention of those details are made at this point in the narrative.

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They went to the field and found him there, hoeing. They asked him how he was, but he did not turn his face to them. At evening, when he took up the wood, he carried the wood and rake on one shoulder and his cloak on the other shoulder. All along the way, he did not put on shoes; [yet] when he arrived at water, he put on his shoes. When he arrived at thorns and thistles, he lifted up his garments [rather than keeping his legs covered].

אזול בדברא ואשכחוהו דהוה קא רפיק.  
יהבו ליה שלמא ולא אסבר להו אפיה.  
בפניא, כי הוה מנקט ציבי, דרא ציבי  
ומרא בחד כתפא, וגלימא בחד כתפא.  
כולה אורחא לא סיים מסאני, כי מטי  
למא - סיים מסאניה. כי מטא להיזמי  
והיגי - דלינהו למניה.

#### Analysis

Chilkiyah’s actions are incomprehensible to the rabbis. We are led to believe that the man whom the wise ones have sought out is either crazy or a fool. Whereas even the most profane acts of a rabbi are viewed as Torah, and his disciples can learn from him simply by watching,<sup>11</sup> the actions of Chilkiyah are at best opaque. Even the great rabbinic powers of deduction can be of no aid, nor is there any reason for a logical person to try to figure out what these ridiculous

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10. Jan Fokkelman, “Every-Day Life as Creation: A Stylistic Analysis of B. Ta’anit 23a-b,” in *Ex Orient Lux* 29 (1981), 77, as cited in Ilan, *Massekhet Ta’anit*, 220.

11. This is evident in the tales of BT B’rachot 62a, in which students follow their teachers even into outhouses and bedrooms. As Dvora Weisberg writes, for the rabbis, “a good student, a student who wants to immerse himself in his teacher’s Torah, absorbs not only the teacher’s formal lessons but also the lessons conveyed through the teacher’s behavior” (Dvora Weisberg, “Women and Torah Study in *Aggadah*,” in Frederick E. Greenspahn, ed., *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 41).

actions mean. At this point in the narrative, then, the power structures remain intact.

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The actions of the Chasid of K'far Imi are similar, though not identical, to Chilkiyah's actions at this point in the narrative. The setting is slightly different: field vs. mountain,<sup>12</sup> the latter conjuring up images from elsewhere in world literature of the hermit or wise man on a mountain.

The food-sharing incident which occurs in Chilkiyah's home, in the Chasid's story occurs on the mountain. The placement of the cloak is different, but intended to be similarly incomprehensible.

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When he arrived at the city, his wife (lit., his house) came out towards him, well-dressed. When he arrived at home, his wife entered their house first, and he entered after her, and then the rabbis entered. He sat and broke bread and did not say to the rabbis, "Come eat!" He shared the bread with the children: he gave the older one one [piece] and the younger one two [pieces].

כי מטא למתא נפקה דביתהו לאפיה כי מיקשטא. כי מטא לביתה עלת דביתהו ברישא, והדר עייל איהו, והדר עיילי רבנן. יתיב וכריך ריפתא, ולא אמר להו לרבנן תו כרוכו. פלג ריפתא לינוקי, לקשישא - חדא, ולזוטרא - תרי.

Analysis

As Abba Chilkiyah enters his home area, we find that the members of his household—his wife and sons—behave in the same perplexing manner that he does. No words pass between Chilkiyah and his family, and yet they all participate with him without confusion. As we see the

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12. Miller argues that the "tura" on which the Chasid is found is a field, which puts Chilkiyah and the Chasid in identical locations as well. "Either way," Miller says, "a rural setting is evident" (Miller, 209, n. 226).



family joining in Chilkiyah's seemingly illogical ways, as readers we begin to wonder whether his actions might, after all, have some meaning behind them. It is unlikely that the whole family is crazy. It seems instead that the whole family—according to the rules of *their* world—shares in a hidden code that the rabbis are unable to break. The humor of this story, which until now appeared to poke fun at the rustic Chilkiyah, begins to turn on its first protagonists—and its authors. Perhaps there is a grand joke of which the rabbis in the story are not a part.

Meanwhile, Chilkiyah's feeding and care-taking of his children, though odd, disrupts our notion of Chilkiyah as childlike. Whereas before this, the rabbis assumed the adult role in the narrative, here Chilkiyah is the parent and the *ba'al ha-bayit* ("master of the house"). However, the craziness of his actions continue to make us question his "adulthood." His parenting and hosting seem to be upside down: he not only feeds the children in reverse proportion to their ages but ignores his guests completely—leaving them as the unspeaking, unserved children at this table.

Yet, is there an echo of Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Menashe in Chilkiyah's swapping of portions? The text begins to hint at this turning point in the narrative that perhaps there is wisdom behind the rain-bringer's actions. As the rabbis move from being adults to children in this tale, Chilkiyah begins to move from being the child to the adult.

As to the designation of his wife as "*beiteihu*" ("his house"): this nomenclature is used "unquestioned"<sup>13</sup> throughout rabbinic literature, though often to odd effect. For example, in an early instance of this usage, the Mishnah claims:

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13. Ibid., 48.

For seven days before the Day of Atonement they separated the high priest from his house into the counselors' apartment, and they made ready for him another priest in his place in case there should befall him some ineligibility. Rabbi Judah says, "Also another wife they made ready for him in case his own wife were to die, as it is said, 'and he shall atone on his own behalf and on behalf of his house'; 'his house'—that is, his wife." They said to him, "If so, there would be no end to the matter!" (Mishnah Yoma 1:1)<sup>14</sup>

Cynthia Baker observes, "In the broadest terms, then, we find a general equation of person and place: woman/wife = house/household. Present in this equation are aspects of sex and purity, relationship and responsibility" (ibid., 49). We will see, later, the extent to which questions of sexuality are indeed at play in this passage.

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The story of the Chasid of K'far Imi does not contain parallels to this part of the narrative. However, the incident of the wife coming out in beautiful clothing will be referred to in flashback later in the tale.

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He said to his wife, "I know that these rabbis have come for rain. Let us go up to the roof and ask for mercy. It is possible that God will desire it and bring us rain—though let us not hold that it is because of our own merit." They went up on the roof: he stood in one corner and she stood in one corner. Clouds went up from his wife's corner.

אמר לה לדביתהו: ידענא דרבנן משום מיטרא קא אתו, ניסק לאיגרא וניבעי רחמי, אפשר דמרצי הקדוש ברוך הוא וייתי מיטרא, ולא נחזיק טיבותא לנפשין. סקו לאיגרא, קם איהו בחדא זזיתא ואיהי בחדא זזיתא, קדים סלוק ענני מהך זזיתא דדביתהו.

Analysis

Presumably, Chilkiyah's words to his wife are to be understood as an aside that the rabbis

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14. Translation Miller, 48.

do not hear. However, the humor of the story is further increased if we imagine the couple having this conversation in front of the rabbis, as if they are not there. Until now, the rabbis were the protagonists of the tale; it was their search for Abba Chilkiyah that brought us here in the first place. However, now as readers we begin to fully sympathize with Chilkiyah and his family. The rabbis have been following Chilkiyah around, even entering his home without an invitation, and yet, while Chilkiyah's actions have been incomprehensible to them, their actions, it seems, have been totally transparent to him. Not only does he understand what they want, but he seems to understand the implications of asking for rain better than they do. Though they are the scholars, he is the one in the position to teach them a lesson. Now, we fully see that Chilkiyah and his wife are the adults in this situation and that the rabbis are the children who are seen but not heard, or who hear but are assumed not to understand.

Meanwhile, the final significant "flip" of this story occurs: the clouds going up from Chilkiyah's wife's corner indicate, in Ilan's words, that "even though it is Abba Hilqyah who has the illustrious pedigree, it is his wife who is the real rainmaker."<sup>15</sup> Looking back on the moment when the rabbis first came seeking Chilkiyah for his rain-bringing abilities ("They went to *beitei* ['his house/wife'] but did not find him"), we find that in overlooking *beitei*, they were overlooking the one they actually sought.

Regarding Chilkiyah's reasoning for not taking credit for the rainfall, it seems that he is both modest (like his cousin, Chanin the Hidden) and desirous of reminding all present of the true hierarchy of the universe; regardless of his and his wife's actions, it will only rain if God so

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15. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 221.

desires.

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

Two major differences exist in the Yerushalmi version of this tale.

First, the Chasid's reasoning for not taking credit for the rainfall is spelled out. Here, unlike what is implied by Chilkiyah's statement, the primary concern is allowing both the rabbis and God to retain their due honor. Thus, the Chasid does what he can to save the rabbis from the shame of knowing that he, who is unlearned, can do what they cannot—and this despite the fact that they came looking for him for just this purpose. Thus, the Chasid is portrayed as essentially upholding the hierarchy of rabbis-above-chasidim, even as he proves that he does have a power that they do not. Here, the Chasid treads gently around his own “potentially destabilizing force in society.”<sup>16</sup> Where the Bavli's account is humorous, the Yerushalmi instead offers a mini-didactic on the importance of honor.

Likewise, here there is expressed a grave concern over profanation of the name of heaven (*chilul shem shamayim*), whereas in the Bavli, in the story of Chilkiyah's grandfather, Choni, the fear of *chilul shem shamayim* gives way before the charms of this childlike trickster:

שלח לו שמעון בן שטח: אלמלא חוני אתה - גוזרני עליך נידוי. שאילו שנים כשני אליהו  
שמפתחות גשמים בידו של אליהו לא נמצא שם שמים מתחלל על ידך? אבל מה אעשה לך  
שאתה מתחטא לפני המקום ועושה לך רצונך, כבן שמתחטא על אביו ועושה לו רצונו.

Shimon b. Shetach sent to him, saying: “If you weren't Choni, I would excommunicate you myself! For, if this time were like the time of Elijah, who held the keys of the rains in his hands, wouldn't the name of heaven have been profaned by

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16. Richard Kalmin and Seth Schwartz, eds., *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 5.

you? But, what can I do to you, given that you have sinned before God and He has done what you asked, like a child who sins against his father but he does what was asked?”

What Shimon—and the Chasid—regard as a serious offense, in the world of Choni and his descendants becomes a matter for parental indulgence.

Second, of course, is the matter of whose prayers for rain are answered. While in the Bavli's story, it is explicitly Chilkiyah's wife who elicits the first clouds, in the Yerushalmi's narrative, we have, simply: “וסלקון וצלון ונחת מיטרא – They went up and prayed, and rain fell.” As Ilan points out, in the Yerushalmi's telling, “the wife's role is neither more nor less significant than that of her husband, but because we know the rabbis expect Abba Hilqyah to pray for rain and bring it, we naturally assume that it was his prayer that was decisive in this case.”<sup>17</sup> The Chasid's wife is an integral part of the Yerushalmi's tale, but she is merely there as “an enabler,” who helps make her husband “into an individual worthy of praying for rain on behalf of the community.”<sup>18</sup> In the Yerushalmi's tale, she is stage prop (and the Chasid's property) rather than subject (and a person).

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When he came down, he said to them, “Why did you come, rabbis?” They said to him, “Our rabbis sent us to you in order that you might ask for mercy for rain.” He said to them, “Blessed is God who did not require you to come to Abba Chilkiyah [in order to make it rain].” They said to him, “We know that the rain came because of you...”

כי נחית, אמר להו: אמאי אתו רבנן? - אמרו ליה: שדרי לן רבנן לגבי דמר למיבעי רחמי אמיטרא. אמר להו: ברוך המקום שלא הצריך אתכם לאבא חלקיה. אמרו ליה: ידעין דמיטרא מחמת מר הוא דאתא.

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17. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 218.

18. Ibid., 220.

### Analysis

These are the first words that Chilkiyah speaks to the rabbis. At last, they engage in dialogue. By now, the tables in the tale have been fully turned. By acknowledging the rabbis' presence only now, after all that has occurred and after the rain has already fallen, Chilkiyah asserts his authority and lets the rabbis know that he has, essentially, granted them an audience (while at the same time claiming that he did not bring the rain!).

Indeed, the question of hierarchy is brought to the fore in these few lines. The rabbis refer to their own masters, to whom they are subordinate. Chilkiyah, in turn, reminds them that there is a power to whom they are all subordinate. No mention is made of Chilkiyah's wife, who has just been responsible for bringing the rain, placing her below or outside of the system of hierarchy altogether.<sup>19</sup>

However, while Chilkiyah asserts his position, his placement on this organizational chart of the Jewish people is unclear. The rabbis defer to Chilkiyah's abilities as a rain-bringer, yet they emphasize that they are part of an authoritative system in which he has no share. They have required his services in a job they could not do themselves: like a servant, he is at once below them and needed by them. Essentially, the rabbis claim that Chilkiyah and his abilities have been domesticated by them. In the words of Richard Kalmin, they have placed him "under the jurisdiction of more conventional religious figures."<sup>20</sup> And yet, Chilkiyah's power is not lost in

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19. I find it humorous that only Abba Chilkiyah is mentioned as coming down from the roof, especially after his wife plays such a significant role. This is reminiscent of Genesis 22, when, after the Akedah, only Abraham explicitly descends the mountain. What room for midrash might there be here? Perhaps, Mrs. Chilkiyah remained on the roof or, like Isaac, went off to study in the yeshivah of Shem and Ever!

this exchange, and it is asserted even more clearly in the question-and-answer that follows. Try as they might, the rabbis cannot fully claim authority over Chilkiyah, and the fact that they respond when he at last addresses them proves that point. It is just this type of passage that Michael Satlow refers to when he writes of the “dynamic of discomfort, ambivalence, aversion, and appropriation” at the heart of rabbinic stories like this one:<sup>21</sup> the rabbis can’t live with and can’t live without Chilkiyah and other non-rabbinic figures who capture the popular imagination.

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The hierarchical structure is much simpler in this version of the story. Though here, too, this is the first time that the rain-bringer addresses the rabbis, he does so here more clearly with respect.

Like Chilkiyah, the Chasid points the rabbis to the ultimate source of the rain, but, unlike Chilkiyah, he takes the opportunity to teach a lesson: rain, itself, is a miracle.

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“...but tell us about these things that made us wonder: What did it mean that when we asked you how you were, you did not turn your face to us?” He said to them: “I was hired for the day, and I thought that I should not be idle.”

“And what did it mean that you carried the wood on one shoulder and the cloak on one shoulder?” He said to them, “The garment was borrowed: I had borrowed it for this [purpose] not for that [purpose].”

אלא לימא לן מר הני מילי דתמיה לן:  
מאי טעמא כי יהבינא למר שלמא לא  
אסבר לן מר אפיה? - אמר להו: שכיר  
יום הוא, ואמינא לא איפגר.  
ומאי טעמא דרא מר ציבי אחד  
כתפיה וגלימא אחד כתפיה? - אמר להו:  
טלית שאולה היתה, להכי - שאל, ולהכי  
- לא שאל.

20. Kalmin, “Holy Men, Rabbis and Demonic Sages,” in Kalmin and Schwartz, 227.

21. Michael L. Satlow, “‘Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit’: Charity and Piety among Jews in Late Antique Palestine,” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 100:2 (Spring 2010), 255.

"What did it mean that the whole way you did not put on shoes, yet when you came to water, you put on your shoes?" He said to them: "I could see the whole path, but in the water, I couldn't see."

"What did it mean that when you came to thorns and thistles, you lifted up your garments from them?" He said to them: "*This* will heal up [if torn], and *that* won't heal up [if torn]."

- מאי טעמא כולה אורחא לא סיים  
מר מסאניה, וכי מטי למיא סיים  
מסאניה? - אמר להו: כולה אורחא  
חדינא, במיא - לא קא חדינא.  
- מאי טעמא כי מטא מר להיזמי  
והיגי דלינהו למניה? - אמר להו: זה  
מעלה ארוכה וזה - אינה מעלה ארוכה.

### Analysis

With the ice finally broken by Chilkiyah's greeting, the rabbis express their confusion about all that has occurred. Having seen that Chilkiyah is indeed capable of calling the rain, they now take the stance that his actions must have logic behind them, even though they are incapable of deducing his reasoning. Chilkiyah's answers are extremely practical, to the point that they seem nearly obvious in retrospect. Fully flipping the tables on the assumptions at the beginning of the story, it is the rabbis who are shown to be fools.

### Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The Chasid's answers to the rabbis are largely parallel to Chilkiyah's, but whereas Chilkiyah answers their questions in a straightforward manner (using "I-statements," as it were), the Chasid responds with rhetorical questions. Kalmin sees in this a signal of antagonism between the Chasid and the rabbis and argues that the Chasid's responses indicate that the meanings behind his actions were "self-evident and [that his] behavior should not have been questioned to begin with."<sup>22</sup>

I believe that the Chasid's rhetoric can just as easily be understood as gentle and intended

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22. Kalmin, 226.



to educate. Just as he has reminded the rabbis of the true source of rain, so too he shows them what it means to take vested and careful interest in one's responsibilities. They may see themselves as the caretakers of the world, but he will take care even of the smallest things under his control: his work, the accuracy of his words, the objects he has borrowed. In the words of Jacob Neusner, the Chasid has concerned himself with "acts of punctiliousness of a moral order."<sup>23</sup> To Neusner, the Chasid's tale is one first and foremost about *zechut* ("merit").<sup>24</sup>

## - 8 -

"What did it mean that when you arrived at the city, your wife (lit. your house) came out towards you, well-dressed?" He said to them: "So that I wouldn't turn my gaze on another woman."

"What did it mean that she entered first, and then you entered after her, and then we entered?" He said to them, "Because you hadn't been authorized by me."

"What did it mean that you broke bread but did not say to us, 'Come eat!'"? "Because there wasn't enough, and I thought, 'I won't cause these rabbis to be beholden to me for nothing.'"

"What did it mean that you gave the older child one piece of bread and the younger two?" He said to them, "This one was at home [all day], and that one was at the synagogue."

- מאי טעמא כי מטא מר למתא נפקא דביתו דמר כי מיקשטא? אמר להו: כדי שלא אתן עיני באשה אחרת.

- מאי טעמא עיילא היא ברישא והדר עייל מר אבתרה, והדר עיילין אנן? - אמר להו: משום דלא בדקיתו לי.

- מאי טעמא כי כריך מר ריפתא לא אמר לן איתו כרוכו? - משום דלא נפישא ריפתא, ואמינא לא אחזיק בהו ברבנן טיבותא בחנן.

- מאי טעמא יהיב מר לינוקא קשישא חדא ריפתא ולזוטרא תרי? - אמר להו: האי קאי בביתא, והאי יתיב בבי כנישתא.

### Analysis

As the chain of questions and answers continues, attention turns to the attire and location of Abba Chilkiyah's wife. Her clothing has been noted, as has the seeming honor of allowing her to

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23. Jacob Neusner, "From Mishnaic Philosophy to Talmudic Religion: The Transformation of Judaism between 200 and 400 AD," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58:4 (Winter, 1990), 648.

24. Ibid.

enter the house first. Chilkiyah's responses indicate that he and his wife are engaged in the shared task of protecting her sexuality and controlling his *yetzer ha-ra* ("wicked impulse"):<sup>25</sup> Chilkiyah's wife dresses up so that her husband won't turn his gaze on other women, and he allows her to enter the house first, followed by him, so that unknown men won't turn their gaze on her.

The importance in the rabbinic imagination of protecting a woman's chastity is highlighted by other stories in BT Taanit in which otherwise problematic figures are deemed meritorious because of such acts of protection. Thus, Abba Umana, a bloodletter who separates men from women in his practice and preserves women's modesty with a special garment during his ministrations, is worthy of receiving daily greetings from heaven (BT Taanit 21b), despite the notoriety of his profession (see BT Kiddushin 82a); likewise, the jailer with black shoes who frequents with gentiles will merit a place in the world to come because he endangers his own life to protect *b'not Yisrael* ("daughters of Israel") in his prison from the interests of gentile men (BT Taanit 22a).

It is taken for granted in all of these stories that men—gentile or otherwise—are naturally inclined to turn their gaze on women who cross their path. Women, meanwhile, are generally no help, since—in the words of Rachel Adler—their hair, movements, voices, and garments "are all enticements to sexual license."<sup>26</sup> Their very presence is capable of overturning the social order:

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25. See Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 219.

26. Rachel Adler, "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah," in *Tikkun* 3:6 (Nov.-Dec., 1988), 29

their perceived “rampant sexuality... represented to the rabbis all that is untamable, unpredictable, and lawless in human beings.”<sup>27</sup>

Chilkiyah’s act, then, of preserving his wife’s chastity indicates his exceptional discipline, and her act of aiding him in this endeavor speaks well of her (or, at least, of how well Chilkiyah runs his household).

All this is further underscored when we return to the topic of the rabbinic use of “*beiteihu*” to mean “his wife.” In this scene, we have Chilkiyah’s wife (“*beiteihu*”) crossing back and forth over the threshold of Chilkiyah’s house (“*beiteihu*”), and she has dressed the part in order to maintain the emphasis on his exclusive rights to house and wife. The doorway itself, then, as Baker writes, appears in this story as “a place fraught with all manner of gendered meanings and requirements.” It is space across which Chilkiyah’s wife “refashions her body—her dress and carriage—to conform to demands regarding her accessibility”<sup>28</sup> and across which Chilkiyah makes known that though the rabbis may enter *beiteihu* (“his house”), they will have no access to *beiteihu* (“his wife”).

Parallel: YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

The Yerushalmi’s tale embodies similar issues. But in this version there is a further shared responsibility that does not appear in the Bavli’s narrative: just as the Chasid’s wife goes out to greet him in beautiful clothes so that his eyes will not stray, when she is home without him, she

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27. Ibid., 102.

28. Baker, 64.

wears rags so that other men will not look at her.<sup>29</sup>

The story of the Chasid of K'far Imi ends at this point, and it ends with a granting of a rabbinic sanction that does not occur in the Bavli's version of the tale. Here, when the rabbis have finished with their questions, they dub the Chasid "worthy of praying and being answered." This is striking in that, whether or not the rabbis offered him this boon, the Chasid has *already* prayed and been answered—and his ability to do so is why the rabbis sought him out. The approbation is not theirs to offer.

What we have here, then, is a rabbinic stamp of approval on behavior that is already taking place: having been found out by the rabbis in a dream, the Chasid is "sanctioned by them only after [he] assures them that his behavior conforms to rabbinic standards of proper conduct."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, by transmitting this story—by including it in the Yerushalmi's canon—the rabbis are sending the clear signal that all such behavior requires their rubber stamp. The Chasid may be powerful, but he has been licensed to act under rabbinic jurisdiction.<sup>31</sup> Like a wife who has the power to attract men's gaze—and even to help in the bringing of rain—the Chasid's faculties must be harnessed by those who have the ultimate rights and responsibilities, in the house and over the land.

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29. Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit*, 221.

30. Kalmin, 227.

31. Ibid., 227.

"And what did it mean that clouds went up first from the corner where your wife stood, rather than your [corner]?" "Because she can [typically] be found at home, and she gives bread to the poor and [thus] brings about direct benefit, whereas I bring [home] money and do not bring about direct benefit.

ומאי טעמא קדים סלוק ענני מהך זזיתא דהוות קיימא דביתהו דמר, לעננא דידיה? - משום דאיתתא שכיחא בביתא, ויהבא ריפתא לענני ומקרבא הנייתה [ואנא יהיבנא] זוזא, ולא מקרבא הנייתה.

### Analysis

Stories in which women are shown as being rewarded because of their acts of giving *tzedakah* abound in rabbinic literature.<sup>32</sup> Although men give *tzedakah* as well, this passage highlights that women have the opportunity to do so directly, because of their presence at home when beggars come to their door.

In some contexts in rabbinic literature, it is taken for granted that women give charity.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>34</sup>In the case of a woman who went inside to bring out bread for a pauper and came back and found him standing next to loaves of *תרומה* (i.e. a portion set aside for the priests. This suggests that he may have conveyed impurity to them)... Rabbi Aqiva declares these impure and the sages declare them pure. (M. Toharot 7:9)

However, in the story of Abba Chilkiyah and his wife, a woman who does so appears to be worthy of special note.

Instead of generally assuming that women *do* give *tzedakah* to all who come to their door, the rabbis more often attempt to contain the unruly and Other female by setting up an image of a woman who is ideal. Chilkiyah's wife, then, when she "feeds the needy, is typical of the vision

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32. See, for instance, M. Toharot 7:9, BT Shabbat 156b, BT Baba Metzia 59b, YT Avodah Zara 2.2 (41a).

33. Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), 265.

34. Translation, Ilan's.

of charitable women the rabbis had in mind.”<sup>35</sup> A woman who fits this mold can remain largely two-dimensional, “apportioned [to] separate spheres and separate responsibilities” than men.<sup>36</sup> Once so classified and categorized, the fact that she may be a wonder-worker and rain-bringer ceases to be of concern; certainly the rabbis would never come looking for her to ask *her* to pray for rain, because she is simply a typical woman, doing what a typical woman is ideally supposed to do.

Parallel: Ketubbot 67b<sup>37</sup>

The story that appears in Ketubbot 67b is not exactly a parallel, but it contains language similar to this depiction of Abba Chilkiyah’s wife: both women are able to give “direct benefit” to the poor because they are “typically at home,” while their husbands are not. Apparently, as women, these figures have inherent opportunities that men do not; their tie to the home becomes their route to merit. They themselves are marginal figures, neither rounded nor complex,<sup>38</sup> and their capacity to give directly gives them the indirect reward of saving their husbands’ feet (Ukba) or fame (Chilkiyah).

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35. Ilan, *Massekhet Taanit*, 221.

36. Judith Baskin, “Women and Judaism,” in Jacob Neusner, et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Brill and Continuum, 2000), vol. 3, 1478.

37. For full text, see appendix, below.

38. Adler, 29.

Or perhaps [it is because of] these bandits who were in our neighborhood: I asked that they die, and she asked that they return in *teshuvah*—and they returned [in *teshuvah*].

אי נמי הנהו ביריוני דהוו בשיבבותן, [אנא] בעי רחמי דלימותו, והיא בעיא רחמי דליהדרו בתשובתא, [ואהדרו].

### Analysis

Throughout this narrative, Abba Chilkiyah has been portrayed as Other for being a non-sage, for using non-rabbinic logic, and most of all, for having a talent for prayer that stands outside the normative rabbinic spectrum. In the words of Stuart Miller, “it is not Torah learning and certainly not facility with halakhic argument that enables him to produce the rain”—rather it is the sincerity he brings to prayer as a “pious rustic.”<sup>39</sup>

If Chilkiyah is such an Other, then all the more so is his wife. Although she is a rustic woman, tied to the home, without access to learning or rabbinic culture, we learn that she has a capacity for strength of prayer that surpasses even her husband’s. In the end, her generously-spirited prayer for the wicked bandits in their neighborhood, outstrips her husband’s wish that they die. She preserves their home—and its extension, their neighborhood—as a symbol of house and generous spirit herself.

### Parallel: BT Brachot 10a<sup>40</sup>

The framework of this short tale in BT Brachot is nearly identical to this final portion of the text in BT Taanit. In both renditions of the story, the husband (here, Rabbi Meir) desires the death of a group of bandits and the wife (here, Beruriah) desires their *t’shuvah* (“repentance”). In

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39. Miller, 209.

40. For full text, see appendix, below.

both stories, the bandits do return in *t'shuvah* (“repentance”). However, the middle of the Brachot tale makes clear that the difference between the versions is significant; this is because of who Beruriah and Meir are, what Beruriah says, and what results.

The story of Chilkiyah and his wife is the story of rustics whose talent is for prayer and who are gifted with some inborn divine favor. The story of Meir and Beruriah, in contrast, is the story of “a couple of sages approaching the same problem.”<sup>41</sup> Where Chilkiyah prays and his wife prays harder, Meir reasons, and Beruriah reasons *better*. Beruriah uses the tools of the rabbinic toolbox to best her husband and win him over to her side. Her triumph here is not in the bandits’ *t'shuvah* (“repentance”)—which Meir, not she, ultimately prays for—but in her using the very program that designates her Other as a woman to out-reason an esteemed sage. Essentially, Meir gains the bandits’ salvation because he has been out-smarted.

With this final parallel to the story of Chilkiyah, the intricacies and complications of Otherness come to their fullest circle—

Chilkiyah’s wife is Other because she is not a man.

Chilkiyah is Other because he is not a sage.

The rabbis are normative but need Chilkiyah and his wife, who have the ear of heaven.

These rabbis can be represented by Meir, one of the greatest of sages.

Yet Meir is bested by Beruriah, whose very existence is a source of fascination and deep discomfort to the rabbis. As the Other who is too close in—too like the (normative) sages to be

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41. Ilan, 223.



dismissed; too like all they hold distant from themselves to be included in their (normative) structures—Beruriah symbolizes the haziness of the boundaries of rabbinic Judaism herself. She—*beiteihu* (“the house/wife”) of Rabbi Meir—stands in the doorway, neither in nor out, and challenges those who find her there on the threshold.

From a prayer for rain, we arrive at the most troubled waters of rabbinic boundaries. The story of Chilkiyah, which was merely humorous at its outset, contains within it ironies that challenge and demand a questioning of the very volumes that contain it.

Yet, the final irony lies in the fact these stories have been included in the Talmud at all. As the recorders of the tales, the rabbis have contained these discomfiting characters by printing them in a rabbinic context, passing them on only to those like them who can read them. It is our privilege now, with boundaries blurred anew in our own time, to reopen these doors, climb again onto these roofs, and see what rain will fall.

## Appendix: Parallel Texts

### YT Taanit 1:4 (60b-c)

#### - 1 -

<sup>42</sup>The *chasid* of K'far Imi appeared to the rabbis [in a dream]. He would pray and rain would fall.

איתחמי לרבנן חסידא דכפר אימי יצלי ומיטרא נחת.

#### - 2 -

The rabbis went to him. His wife (lit. the people of his house) said to them, "He is on the mountain."

סלקון רבנן לגביה. אמרה לון בני בייתיה בטורא הוא יהיב.

#### - 3 -

They went to him. They said to him, "Good day," and he did not answer them. He sat and ate and did not say to them, "You break bread." When he was going home, he made a bundle of wood and carried his cloak over the load.

נפקון לגביה. אמרון ליה אישר ולא אגיבון יתב מיכול ולא אמ' לון אתון כריכין מי עלל עבד חד מוכל דקיסין ויהב גולתא מרום מובלה.

#### - 5 -

He entered [his house] and said to his wife, "These rabbis here want us to pray so that rain will fall. If I do pray and rain falls, they will be shamed. But if it does not [rain], it will be a profanation of the name of Heaven. Instead, come, let's you and I go up [to the roof] and pray. If rain falls, we will say to them, 'Heaven has already made miracles!' And if it doesn't, we will say to them, 'We are not worthy to pray and be answered.'" They went up and prayed, and rain fell.

עאל ואמר לבני בייתיה אילין רבנן הכא בעי ניצלי וייחות מיטרא. ואין אנא מצלי ומטרא נחת גנאי הוא לון. ואין לא חילול שם שמים הוא. אלא אייתי אנא ואת ניסוק ונצלי. אין נחת מיטרא אנן אמרין לון כבר דעבדון שמייא ניסין. ואין לא אנן אמרין לון לית אנן כדיי מצלייא ומתענייא. וסלקון וצלון ונחת מיטרא.

#### - 6 -

He came down to them. He said to them, "Why have the rabbis taken the trouble to come here today?" They said, "We wanted you to pray and ask for rain." He said to them, "Do you need my prayers? Heaven has already made miracles."

נחת לגבון. אמר לון למה איטרפון רבנן להכא יומא דין. אמרין ליה בעיי תצלי וייחות מיטרא. אמר לון ולצלותי אתון צריכין כבר דעבדון שמייא ניסין.

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42. Translation mine.

- 7 -

They said to him, "Why, when you were on the mountain, we said to you, 'Good day,' and you did not answer us?" He said to them, "I was busy in my work. Should I turn my mind from my work?"

[They] said to him, "And why, when you sat down to eat did you not say to us, 'You break bread'?" He said to them, "I only had enough for my portion. Should I have spoken to you insincerely?"

They said to him, "Why, when you came down did you carry your cloak over your load?" He said to them, "It is not mine: it is borrowed for me to [use it] while praying. Should I [risk] tearing it?"

אמרין ליה למה כד הויתא בטורא אמרינן לך אישר ולא אגיבתינן. אמר לון דהוינה עסיק בפעולותי. מה הוינה מסעה דעתי מן פעלותי.

אמר ליה ולמה כד יתבת למיכול לא אמרת לן איתון כריכין. אמר לון דלא הוה גביי אלא פלחי מה הוינא מימור לכון בחנפין.

אמרין ליה למה כד דאתיה למיעול יהבת גולתה מרום מובלה. אמר לון דלא הוות ידי, שאילה הוות דניצלי בה מה הוינא מבזעא יתה.

- 8 -

They said to him, "And why, when you were on the mountain, did your wife wear dirty clothes, but when you came in from the mountain, she wore clean ones?"

He said to them, "When I am on the mountain, she wears dirty clothes so that no man will turn his gaze on her. And when I come in from the mountain, she wears clean clothes so that I won't turn my gaze on another woman.

They said to him, "You are worthy of praying and being answered."

אמרון ליה ולמה כד הווי את בטורא איתתך לבשה מאנין צאין, וכד דאת עליל מן טורא היא לבשה מאנין נקיין.

אמר לון כד דאנא הוי בטורא היא לבשה מאנין צאין דלא יתן בר נש עינוי עלה, וכד דאנא עליל מן טורא היא לבשה מאנין נקיין דלא יתן עיניי באיתא אוחרי. אמרון ליה יאות את מצליי ומתעניי.

**Ketubbot 67b**

- 9 -

<sup>43</sup>There was a poor man in Mar Ukba's neighborhood, and every day he [Mar Ukba] would put four zuz in his door socket. One day, he [the poor man] said, "I will go and see who is doing this good thing for me." That day, Mar Ukba was late at the beit midrash. His wife (lit. his house) came with him. When he [the poor man] saw them moving the door socket, he went out after them. They ran from him and entered into a furnace [just] cleared of ashes. Mar Ukba's feet were burning. His wife said to him, "Lift your feet and place them on my feet." He was distressed. She said to him, "I am [typically] found at home, and [thus can give the poor] direct benefit."

מר עוקבא הוה עניא בשיבבותיה, דהוה רגיל כל יומא דשדי ליה ארבעה זוזי בצינורא דדשא. יום אחד אמר: איזיל איחזי מאן קעביד בי ההוא טיבותא. ההוא יומא נגהא ליה למר עוקבא לבי מדרשא, אתיא דביתהו בהדיה, כיון דחזיוה דקא מצלי ליה לדשא נפק בתרייהו, רהוט מקמיה עיילי להווא אתונא דהוה גרופה נורא, הוה קא מיקליין כרעיה דמר עוקבא, אמרה ליה דביתהו: שקול כרעיך אותיב אכרעאי. חלש דעתיה, אמרה ליה: אנא שכיחנא בגויה דביתא ומקרבא אהנייתי.

## Brachot 10a

### - 10 -

<sup>44</sup>There were bandits in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir, and they distressed him very much. Rabbi Meir would ask for mercy over them that they would die. His wife, Beruriah, said to him, "What is your reasoning? —Because it is written: *Let sinners [חטאים] be wiped out [from the land]* (Ps. 104:35). Is it written 'sinners' [חוטאים]? [No,] it says 'sins' [חטאים]. And, too, drop to the end of the verse: *And wicked ones will be no more.* Since '*sins will be wiped out,*' '*wicked ones will be no more.*' [Thus,] instead, ask for mercy over them that they may return in *teshuvah* and be wicked ones no more." He asked for mercy over them, and they returned in *teshuvah*.

הנהו בריוני דהוו בשבבותיה דרבי מאיר  
והוו קא מצערו ליה טובא, הוה קא בעי  
רבי מאיר רחמי עלויהו כי היכי דלימותו.  
אמרה ליה ברוריא דביתהו: מאי דעתך?  
- משום דכתיב: (תהלים ק"ד) יתמו  
חטאים, מי כתיב חוטאים? חטאים כתיב  
ועוד, שפיל לסיפיה דקרא: ורשעים עוד  
אינם, כיון דיתמו חטאים - ורשעים עוד  
אינם? אלא, בעי רחמי עלויהו דלהדרו  
בתשובה - ורשעים עוד אינם. בעא רחמי  
עלויהו והדרו בתשובה.

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43. Translation mine.

44. Translation mine.

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