

Text Immersion Project

Bavli Berakhot Chapters 1-5

and Related Selections From Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*

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Main Contents:

Essay 1 – A Study of B. *Berakhot* 5a-b

Essays 2 & 3 - An Examination of B. *Berakhot* Chapter One

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Essay One

A Study of *Bavli Berakhot* 5a-b

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Introduction

Creating order out of chaos (תָּחַר בְּחָרָה) is God's first assignment according to Genesis 1:1. In contrast to the cosmologies of surrounding ancient near eastern cultures, the Bible asserts that there is only one God creating and there are no battles between benevolent and malicious gods out of which the earth and humanity are born¹. Monotheism envisages the cosmic order differently from its predecessors. Everything is supposed to be in control of the One God and this is presumably why, very shortly after the creation story, we read the first and dominant biblical explanation for human suffering (Gen. 3:16-19), namely as punishment for the transgression of a divine command. Although dominant, this explanation for human suffering is challenged within the bible itself when the theory does not apparently match reality. Abraham challenges God's plan to destroy Sodom (Gen. 18:25) "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"² The book of Job is a study in theodicy. And Kohelet proclaims that (Eccl. 8:14) "...sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration."

The problem had not been resolved by the rabbinic period and so the classical rabbis too grappled with this issue. Their diverse struggles are recorded throughout rabbinic literature³. The focus of this paper is a *sugya* found in Bavli Berakhot 5a-b that Kraemer describes as "...the longest deliberation (by far) on suffering as such in all classical rabbinical literature."⁴ My analysis of this *sugya* is structured in three parts. The first two parts identify what I consider to be the important tensions that play themselves out in the text. The third section takes a more synthetic approach and

¹ E.g. Dalley, p. 252-264

² Tanakh, *The Holy Scriptures*, (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society) 1985.

³ For a comprehensive account of the rabbinic responses to suffering, see Kraemer, especially p50-210

⁴ *ibid.* p188

seeks to establish lessons that we may take from the text. An annotated translation-outline of the *sugya* is found appended to this paper and it is to this that the ensuing analysis will predominantly refer.

Before we begin it is worth noting that how to understand the suffering of the righteous remains a burning question for us today, especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust, but also because in our everyday lives, sadly, most of us know individuals whose suffering seems unjust. I hope that this analysis sheds a little light on this dark and ancient problem.

Analysis

Part A: A Cosmic Dialectic

My first assertion is that fundamentally this *sugya* represents a rabbinic exploration of the dialectic that lies, at the cosmological level, between order and chaos and how this dialectic manifests itself in the realm of human experience. I perceive two competing perspectives that wrestle for attention throughout this *sugya*. One perspective promotes the cosmology associated with variations of the relatively orderly Deuteronomic notion of reward and punishment, namely that righteousness is rewarded and sin punished. The just reward or punishment will usually be meted out in this world but sometimes in the next. Acting righteously can be reliably expected to engender divine favor which will be reflected in prosperity and wellbeing. Conversely, sin predictably results in divinely ordained afflictions of one sort or another. God's rule of over cosmic order is assured, chaos, as manifested by unjust affliction, is minimized. The second perspective expressed in this *sugya* questions this orderly arrangement and underscores cracks in the case for a predictable link between human action and divine reaction. In so doing, it raises the specter of cosmic disorder lurking closer to reality than one would like to acknowledge.

The first perspective, that espousing order, is first expressed in this context in the material which frames the *sugya*. In contrast to Kraemer⁵ and Jacobs⁶, I contend that the *sugya* is in fact meaningfully and significantly framed by attempts to delineate the apotropaic qualities of night time prayer (the Shema upon the bed) at the outset of the *sugya* and by the power of the bed's orientation to affect successful reproduction at its end. The reader is informed at the outset (part 1) that the Shema has the power to ward off evil; it is as if the one who recites it holds a mighty sword and is protected against earthly attackers; it wards off demons; and it keeps away afflictions that turn out to be divine in origin. Similarly, at the end of the *sugya* (part 9), the reader is reminded that prayer "close to the bed" (i.e. immediately upon rising) is important and that the bed's appropriate orientation is essential to having boys and avoiding miscarriages. The key formulation "...כל ה"7 signals these rabbinic attempts to describe a perceived orderly reality – one in which "correct" human actions will result in corresponding divine reactions. I believe these passages properly constitute the frame of the *sugya*.

This first perspective is also voiced through much of the body of the *sugya*. One who is faced with an affliction is instructed to proceed through a three-step process to ascertain the nature of the affliction – examine deeds; consider amount of Torah study; and failing that, to default to "afflictions of love"⁸. In other words, most of the time, afflictions can be accounted for by a careful audit of behavior. In the case of R Huna, whose wine turns to vinegar, this reliable principle is reiterated when it is discovered that he had sinned "on a technicality". For those unusual circumstances where no significant wrong conduct (or lack of Torah study) can be found, then divine justice and cosmic order are maintained through the notion of "afflictions of love." These, it

⁵ Kraemer p. 189

⁶ Jacobs p. 41

⁷ Specifically: "כל הנותן מטתו בין צפון לדרום..." and "כל הקורא קריאת שמע על מטתו"

⁸ Part 3: a, b & c

unfolds⁹, reflect divine love for the righteous who are given the opportunity, minimally at least, to “see offspring and have a long life” (Isaiah 53:10) as well as to retain their learning. Like a slave injured by his owner, who must then be freed, a righteous person who is afflicted by God without having “deserved” it, is freed from bondage to his/her sins through such suffering¹⁰. Like meat that is improved by salting, afflictions reflect the divine covenant and cleanse the sufferer of his/her sins¹¹. All this provided that the sufferer accepts these afflictions with love/consent/knowledge¹². These are the main voices reflecting cosmic order, predictability and divine justice.

The second perspective, which subtly questions cosmic order, predictability and even divine justice, challenges the first perspective and is in dialectic conversation with it. This perspective too has several voices.

The first voice is reflected in the questions that are raised about whether an affliction can be considered an “affliction of love” when the sufferer is rendered unable to either study Torah or pray¹³. As Kraemer puts it, these severe afflictions render the sufferer unable to communicate with God and as such call to question how impairments such as these could be manifestations of divine love¹⁴. Although the Gemara manages to explain these misgivings away¹⁵, it would seem that the reader ought to retain some doubt as to the workability of the theory of “afflictions of love”. This doubt will be heightened as the other questioning voices are heard.

The second voice is that given to R. Yohanan who apparently carries around a bone belonging to the tenth son of his to die. He challenges the neat and orderly notion expressed in a baraita that “anyone who engages in Torah study, [performs] acts of loving kindness and buries his

⁹ Especially in part 3c: i, ii and iii.

¹⁰ Part 4 c i

¹¹ Part 4 c ii

¹² Part 3c, ii

¹³ Part 4 a & b

¹⁴ Kraemer, p 192

¹⁵ Part 4 c

children -all his sins are forgiven”¹⁶. I would say that his anger resonates through the text and is not neutralized, despite apparent attempts to respond to it by rather limply providing scriptural word games¹⁷. In fact, it would seem that R. Yohanan’s opposition continues through the rest of part 6 and elicits several answers, none of which seems to adequately address what must be his burning desire to explain the tragedy which befell him. In part 6 the reader is not given R Yohanan’s response to the final answer but in part 7, R. Yohanan and two other rabbis are given adequate voice to respond.

Part 7 articulates the third voice of the “challenging perspective” and in fact it is composed of three voices that together loudly resonate in their opposition to neat theories to explain suffering. Part 7 consists of three almost identical episodes in which three different rabbis suffer some kind of illness that renders them bed-bound. In each case, they are asked whether their “affliction is pleasing,” and in each case they respond clearly that they are not pleasing and nor are any potential rewards. Earlier in the *sugya* we learned that “afflictions of love” require the sufferer to accept the sufferings lovingly, yet these three rabbis (one of whom is R. Yohanan) will not (or cannot) do so.

I submit that these voices come together to provide a perspective that challenges the prevailing traditional notions of cosmic order and divine justice that are at the heart of the first perspective. While the first perspective seeks to create cosmic order, to explain suffering in ways which conform to ideas about God’s omniscience and justice, the second perspective serves to raise doubt as to whether such neat explanations of apparent divine injustice hold up to scrutiny. It seems that, in the mind of the intended reader whom Kraemer asserts is “questioning and critical”¹⁸, such doubt is indeed raised. But there is another, partly overlapping dialectic that I suggest is playing itself out in this *sugya* and it is to this that we now turn.

¹⁶ Part 6

¹⁷ Part 6b

¹⁸ Kraemer p 188

Part B – Theory vs. Reality

My second assertion is that this *sugya* also reflects a tension between a prevailing tendency to create theories that explain the experiences of everyday lives and the not infrequent inadequacy of those theories to provide comfort in the face of real, personal suffering. This assertion shares some common elements with the first assertion (part A above) in that: much of the first perspective, which seeks to make order out of chaos and divine justice out of apparent injustice, takes the form of theory; and much of the second perspective, which raises doubts about the theories, stems from the gap that exists between theory and reality. With a mind thus to avoiding repetition we now turn to an analysis of the *sugya* focusing on the dialectic between theory and reality.

The dominant theology expressed in this *sugya* is one which presumes divine omniscience, benevolence and justice and so explains most suffering as a response to transgressions of one type or another. As we saw, certain actions, such as the recitation of Shema at bedtime, can be apotropaic¹⁹, but transgressions inevitably bring about affliction. The unavoidable problem of the suffering of the righteous is dealt with by first carefully assessing the conduct of the individual²⁰. Minor infractions that would justify divine wrath may be overlooked at the outset²¹. Only then is the possibility of “afflictions of love” considered²². Much of the remainder of the *sugya* revolves around elucidating the conditions under which these types of affliction may or may not operate²³.

But how does this theoretical framework hold up in reality? Does it successfully explain the suffering witnessed in the daily life of the rabbis? Is it of comfort to those who are afflicted with

¹⁹ Part 1

²⁰ Part 3

²¹ Part 8, R. Huna's wine.

²² Part 3 c

²³ Especially parts 4 and 6

illness and loss? It seems that our *sugya* conveys significant dissatisfaction with the theoretical framework proposed in the *sugya*.

R. Yohanan repeatedly raises doubts about the rewards that are alleged to come to one who loses a child²⁴. As Kraemer notes: "...there is good reason for R. Yohanan to have difficulty with 'burying one's children' - he himself was forced to do so and thus he knew this pain intimately. Is it this pain, we are forced to ask ourselves, that doesn't allow him to find scriptural proof for the benefits of losing one's child?"²⁵ It would seem that the gemara's final answer to R. Yohanan's concern is inadequate²⁶. The doubt remains.

The chasm between theory and practice is perhaps even more clearly manifested in part 7 when three prominent rabbis (a beth din, no less!) are asked whether their own, apparently otherwise inexplicable afflictions, are "precious to them"²⁷. All three reject both their afflictions and their potential rewards, representing what could be perceived as a crushing blow to the orderly schema that had been constructed. When faced with real-life suffering, the rabbis themselves don't seem to buy the theory. Kraemer expresses it this way:

Justice can be worked out in theory; when one rationalization is confronted by too many anomalies, adjustments can be made to account for the troublesome reality. As long as we remain in the realm of theory, a perfect system of justice can be maintained. When speaking of suffering, on the other hand, it is far more difficult to escape the genuine problem presented by the individual experience. As long as the discussion has no name, we may rationalize all we wish. As soon as we must speak of R. Yohanan's loss or of R. Eleazar's illness, it is impossible not to hesitate and to allow questions to resound, plaguing us once and then again...Application of the theory to individuals is what provokes misgivings and protest.²⁸

²⁴ Part 6 a,c,e

²⁵ Kraemer p 195

²⁶ Part 6 g

²⁷ It is worth noting that this phraseology "afflictions precious" is the same as that used in earlier, Palestinian, texts that contain versions of our *sugya*'s part 5 – *Sifrei* and *Mechilta* (See end of the appendix)

²⁸ Kraemer p 208

Yet despite the "misgivings and protest", the Gemara turns to the case of R. Huna to reassert the point that afflictions can be accounted for through close examination of one's actions. And then finally we return to where we began, by the correctly orientated bed, reciting prayers and hoping (expecting?) that God will bless us.

Part C - Searching for Harmony, Lessons for Today.

Wolowelsky notes, commenting on the Talmud's approach to theodicy, that: "like Job and his friends, the rabbis did not have access to the first chapter in which the rationale for what happens to people is laid out. When faced with a self-assured explanation which cannot be proved either way, the Talmud's editors sometimes felt it wise simply to let the reader decide if, indeed, the author should really have been satisfied with his pat explanation."²⁹ What explanation are we to take from b. Berakhot 5a/b? One, rather perplexing answer is given by Jacobs:

If our analysis is correct, we have in our *sugya*...not at all a series of theological propositions intended primarily as such but rather theological material used to build up a literary, contrived piece of argumentation, in which the main interest is not in the content, but in the form...³⁰

I don't accept this conclusion, as parts A and B of this paper demonstrate, and instead suggest several important messages that emerge from the theological content of our *sugya* and our analysis of it.

First, we learn from this *sugya* that tensions existed for the rabbis, as for us, between finding a comprehensive theology that maintains God's omniscience, benevolence and justice and finding one which also reliably accounts for observed reality. Related to this is the challenge that the rabbis faced, as do we, in attempting to bring religious theory into practice in a way that is valuable,

²⁹ Wolowelsky p. 465-466

³⁰ Jacobs, p. 43

promotes healing and gives strength to those who need it most. Sometimes acknowledging the limit of our ability to understand the way the world works is an important step towards making peace with it.

In fact, I believe that this very conclusion is voiced quite explicitly in the *sugya*, in a passage that we have not yet analyzed. It is a passage that Kraemer³¹ leaves out completely and Jacobs considers to have "...no connection at all with the theme of sufferings. It has been inserted here solely because it is a further comment on the verse quoted by R. Yohanan"³² The passage is what I have labeled part 2. I differ with both eminent scholars. While the passage is certainly linked to the previous one, as Jacobs points out³³, through the verse Prov. 4:2, it seems that it may actually serve an important function in our *sugya*. As I understand it, its assertion is essentially that: "the nature of the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* is not like[that of] humans". No matter how much we theorize and search for a way to understand our sufferings, ultimately God is in charge and God works in ways that are beyond our comprehension because God is so utterly different from us. Perhaps this is in fact the central message of the *sugya*.

Another message we can take from this *sugya* is one which is germane to the sensitive fulfillment of the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*, or the mitzvah of comforting the bereaved. Wolowelsky puts it this way: "...in explaining why bad things happen to good people, one should have the good sense to realize that explanations that sound good to one person may not be so proper when offered to others..."³⁴ This is suggested by the first message we just discussed, but it is also apparent from the responses of the three afflicted rabbis found in part 7. They were not interested in theories to explain their suffering. They wanted to be relieved of their suffering. But they also benefited from

³¹ Kraemer, p189

³² Jacobs, p.33

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Wolowelsky, p468

the companionship of a visiting friend and colleague. Sometimes weeping together at the sheer sadness of it all, as occurs when R. Yohanan visits R. Elazar³⁵, is the best thing we can do.

In responding to the age-old monotheistic dilemma of understanding the suffering of the righteous perhaps this is all we can, and ought to do.

³⁵ Part 7 c

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I. The apotropaic qualities of the recitation of Shema upon the bed.

a. It is like having a double-edged sword in one's hand.

¹ אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק: כָּל הַקּוֹרֵא קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע עַל מִטָּתוֹ, כְּאִלּוּ אוֹחֵז חֶרֶב שֶׁל שְׁתֵּי פִיּוֹת בְּיָדוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תְּהִלִּים קמ"ט) "רֹמְמוֹת אֶל בְּגִרוֹנָם וְחֶרֶב פִּיפִּיּוֹת בְּיָדָם".

Rabbi Yitzhak said: everyone who recites *shema* upon his bed [at bedtime], it is as though he holds a double-edged sword in his hand, as it is said (Ps. v6): "with paeans to God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands"⁴

i. Question

מאי משמע?

What is the meaning? [i.e. how was this inference drawn from the verse cited?]

ii. Answer

אָמַר מַר זוּטְרָא וְאַתִּימָא רַב אֲשִׁי: מְרִישָׁא דַּעֲנִינָא, דְּכָתִיב (תְּהִלִּים קמ"ט) "יִעֲלוּ חֲסִידִים בְּכָבוֹד; יִרְנְנוּ עַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹתָם", וְכָתִיב בְּתַרְיָה: "רֹמְמוֹת אֶל בְּגִרוֹנָם וְחֶרֶב פִּיפִּיּוֹת בְּיָדָם".
Mar Zutra (and others say Rav Ashi) said [in reply to the question]: [the answer comes] from the preceding verse (Ps. 149:5) "Let the faithful exult in glory; let them shout for joy upon their couches[beds]...", and after that is written: "...with paeans to God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands". [The scriptural reference to shouting "for joy upon their beds" is understood to be an allusion to the recitation of Shema at bedtime].

1. These large font Hebrew letters represent the Steinsaltz Hebrew paragraph divisions.
2. I have attempted to indicate Stammaitic and Tannaitic material in the Hebrew via this Key: underline = Stam Talmud; **Bold** = Tannaitic Material.
3. Al 2, 3 or 4.
4. NJPS *Tanakh* translations are used unless noted otherwise.
5. AB6
6. AB6

b. It keeps demons away.

⁷אמר רבי יצחק: כל הקורא קריאת שמע על מטתו - מזיקין בדילין הימנו, שנאמר (איוב ה') "ובני רשף יגביהו עוף" ואין עוף אלא תורה, שנאמר: (משלי כ"ג) "התעייף עיניך בו ואיננו" ואין רשף אלא מזיקין, שנאמר (דברים ל"ב) "מזי רעב ולחמי רשף וקטב מרירי".

And Rabbi Yitzhak said: everyone who recites *shema* upon his bed [at bedtime] demons keep away from him, as it is said (Job 5:7): "...Just as sparks [בנירשף] fly [עוף] upward." And עוף can only mean Torah, as it is said (Prov. 23:5) "You see it, then it is gone; [It grows wings and flies away, Like an eagle, heavenward]." ⁸ And רשף can only mean demons, as it is said (Deut. 32: 24): "Wasting famine, ravaging plague, Deadly pestilence..." ⁹ [Thus the Job 5:7 reference is understood as "the demons are removed by Torah" specifically the recitation of *shema* in this context].

c. It keeps afflictions away.

ד' אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש¹⁰: כל העוסק בתורה יסורין בדילין הימנו, שנאמר: "ובני רשף יגביהו עוף" ואין עוף אלא תורה, שנאמר: "התעייף עיניך בו ואיננו" ואין רשף אלא יסורין, שנאמר: "מזי רעב ולחמי רשף".

And Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: everyone who engages in the study of Torah, afflictions keep away from him, as it is said (Job 5:7): "...Just as sparks [בנירשף] fly [עוף] upward."

7. Kraemer's Exposition begins here.

8. Rashi: [the verse should be understood to mean that] if one closes his eyes to Torah it will be forgotten. A better translation of the verse in this context would be "If one covers [התעייף] his eyes from it, it is gone".

9. "is the name of an noontime demon" as derived from Pesachim 111b:

"קטב מרירי, תרי קטבי הו, חד מקמי טיהרא וחד מבתר טיהרא, דמקמי טיהרא - קטב מרירי שמו, ומיחוי בי כדא דכמכא, והדר ביה בחשא. דבתר טיהרא - (תהלים צאו) "קטב ישוד צהרים" שמו, ומיחוי בי קרנא דעיזא, והדר ביה כנפיא."

"*ketev meriri*, there are two *ketevs* - 1 one before noon, one after noon. The one before noon is called *ketev meriri* ...that of the afternoon "*ketev* that wastes at noon"" (See Jastrow p 1346, *ketev* is the name of a demon).

10. A12

And עץ can only mean Torah, as it is said (Prov. 23:5) "You see it, then it is gone; [It grows wings and flies away, Like an eagle, heavenward]."¹¹ And רשף can only mean sufferings, as it is said (Deut. 32: 24): "Wasting famine, ravaging plague"¹²

i. A challenge is raised by R. Yohanan

אמר ליה רבי יוחנן: ¹³הא אפילו תינוקות של בית רבן יודעין אותו, שנאמר: (שמות ט"ו) "ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע לקול ה' אלהיך והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו ושמרת כל חקיו כל המחלה אשר שמתי במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני ה' רופאך"

Rabbi Yohanan said to him [Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish]: Even children in school know this¹⁴, as is it said (Exod. 15:26): "He said, If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer."

ii. A clarification is offered, but one which describes that which will befall one who does not engage in Torah study, rather than referring to the recitation of the Shema at bedtime. God is now the named agent of the afflictions. The discussion no longer centers around anonymous night time forces, demons or simply "afflictions".

אלא: כל שאפשר לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק - הקדוש ברוך הוא מביא עליו יסורין מכווערין ועוכרין אותו, שנאמר: (תהלים ל"ט) "נאלמתי דומיה החשיתי מטוב וכאבי נעכר", ואין "טוב" אלא תורה, שנאמר: (משלי ד') "כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתי אל תעזבו".

11. Rashi: [the verse should be understood to mean that] if one closes his eyes to Torah it will be forgotten. A better translation of the verse in this context would be "If one covers [התעין] his eyes from it, it is gone".
12. Rashi: "The word רשף is written between the words רעב (representing sufferings) and מרי (representing demons) and so can be understood to refer to either of these" (thus both Rabbi Yithak and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish's interpretations of Deut 32:24 have justification).
13. AI2
14. Rashi: children who have not yet studied the book of Job know this from their studies of the *Chumash*

[Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish replies] Rather: everyone who is able to engage in the study of Torah but does not do so, the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* will bring repulsive afflictions upon him and will make him repulsive, as it is said (Ps. 39:3): "I was dumb, silent; I was very (מטוב) still while my pain was repulsive¹⁵ (נעכר)." And "Tov" only refers to Torah, as it is said (Prov 4:2): "For I give you good (טוב) instruction; Do not forsake my teaching."

2. Bridging passage - God's motives are not like human motives. The reader is primed to consider that what pleases God may not make sense to humans because God "thinks" differently.

אמר רבי זירא¹⁶ ואיתימא רבי חנינא בר פפא¹⁷: בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם, מדת בשר ודם - אדם מוכר חפץ לחבירו, מוכר עצב ולוקח שמח אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא אינו כן - נתן להם תורה לישראל ושמח, שנאמר: "כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתי אל תעזבו".

[Another teaching derived from Prov 4:2] Rabbi Zeira, and some say Rabbi Hanina bar Papa said: Come and see that the nature of the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* is not like the nature of humans. The nature of humans [is thus]: a person sells something desireable to his friend. The seller is sad¹⁸ [at the loss of the object] and the taker [buyer] is happy, however the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* is not like this - [God] gave Torah to Israel and was happy, as it is said: "For I give you good instruction; Do not forsake [i.e. do not return] my teaching."

15. JPS: "intense"

16. AI3

17. AI3

18. It seems that a kind of liquidation sale is envisaged whereby the seller really doesn't want to be rid of his possessions, he just needs the money urgently.

3. A theoretical approach to explaining afflictions.

ה' אמר רבא¹⁹ ואיתימא רב חסדא²⁰: אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו - יפשפש במעשיו, שנאמר (איכה ג') "נחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה ונשובה עד ה'" פשפש ולא מצא - יתלה בבטול תורה, שנאמר: (תהלים צ"ד) "אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו". ואם תלה ולא מצא - בידוע שיסורין של אהבה הם, שנאמר: (משלי ג') "כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח".

If a person sees that afflictions have come upon him,

a. Step I - Examine one's actions.

he should examine his actions, as it says (Lament.

3:40): "Let us search and examine our ways, And turn back to the LORD".

b. Step 2 - Consider neglect of Torah

[Should he] examine [his deeds] but not find [any that explain the afflictions, then] he should ascribe [his afflictions] to neglect of Torah, as it is said (Ps. 94:12) "Happy is the man whom You discipline (תיסרו), O LORD, the man You instruct in Your teaching".

c. Step 3 - Afflictions of [divine] love.

And if he ascribes [his afflictions to the neglect of Torah] but does not find [sufficient explanation] then it is known that [the afflictions] are "afflictions of love", as it is said (Prov. 3:12): "For whom the LORD loves, He rebukes, [As a father the son whom he favors]."

19.AB4

20.AB3

i. An explanation of "afflictions of love" - Definition

אמר רבא אמר רב סחורה²² אמר רב הונא²¹: כל שהקדוש ברוך הוא חפץ בו - מדכאו ביסורין, שנאמר: (ישעיהו נ"ג) "וה' חפץ דכאו החלי"
יכול אפילו לא קבלם מאהבה - תלמוד לומר (ישעיהו נ"ג) "אם תשים אשם נפשו", מה אשם לדעת - אף יסורין לדעת.
ואם קבלם מה שכרו?
-(ישעיהו נ"ג) "יראה זרע יאריך ימים"
ולא עוד אלא שתלמודו מתקיים בידו, שנאמר: (ישעיהו נ"ג) "וחפץ ה' בידו יצלח".

Rava said [in the name of] Rav Sechurah who spoke [in the name of] Rav Hunah: All those with whom the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* is pleased [God] clears of sin through afflictions, as it is said (Isaiah 53:10): "It pleased God to purify him through disease"²³

ii. Required intentionality of the recipient - love/consent/knowledge

One might have thought that this applies even when he did not receive them [the afflictions] with love, but scripture says (Isaiah 53:10): "if he made himself an offering for guilt," - Just as a guilt offering must be [performed] with consent/knowledge, so too afflictions [must be experienced] with consent/knowledge.

iii. The reward.

And if one received afflictions [with love/consent/knowledge], what is its reward?
 (Isaiah 53:10) "He will see offspring and have long life."
 And not only that but also his learning will remain in his hand [i.e. he won't forget his learning], as it is said (Isaiah 53:10): "And that through him the LORD's purpose might prosper."

21.?

22. ? AB2 or AI4

23. JPS: "But the LORD chose to crush him by disease,"

4. A disagreement serves to clarify the theoretical scope of "afflictions of love"

ופליגי בה רבי יעקב בר אידי²⁴ ורבי אחא בר חנינא²⁵;

There was a disagreement between Rabbi Yaakov b. Idi and Rabbi Aha b. Hanina:

a. Option 1 - afflictions causing no neglect of Torah

חד אמר: אלו הם יסורין של אהבה - כל שאין בהן בטול תורה, שנאמר: "אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יח ומתורתך תלמדנו"

One said: these are afflictions of love - those that do not involve [i.e. cause] neglect of Torah, as it is said: (Ps. 94:12) "Happy is the man whom You discipline (תיסרנו), O LORD, the man You instruct in Your teaching"

b. Option 2 - afflictions causing no neglect of prayer

וחד אמר: אלו הן יסורין של אהבה - כל שאין בהן בטול תפלה, שנאמר: (תהלים ס"ו) ברוך אלהים אשר לא הסיר תפילתי וחסדו מאתי.

And the other said: these are afflictions of love - those that do not involve [i.e. cause] neglect of prayer, as it is said (Ps. 66:20) "Blessed is God who has not turned away (הסיר) my prayer, or His faithful care from me."

c. Answer

אמר להו רבי אבא בריה דרבי חייא בר אבא²⁶, הכי אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן²⁷: אלו ואלו יסורין של אהבה הן, שנאמר: "כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח" אלא מה תלמוד לומר "ומתורתך תלמדנו"? - אל תקרי תלמדנו אלא תלמדנו. דבר זה "מתורתך תלמדנו" קל וחומר משן ועין: מה שן ועין שהן אחד מאבריו של אדם - עבד יוצא בהן לחרות, יסורין שממרקין כל גופו של אדם - על אחת כמה וכמה,

Rabbi Abba b. Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba said, thus said Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: Both of these are afflictions of love [i.e. even if the affliction

24. AI2-3

25. ?

26. AI3

27. AI2

diminishes the ability to study Torah or to pray it still may be an affliction of love}, as it is said (Prov. 3:12): "For whom the LORD loves, He rebukes".

i. Metaphor I - releasing a slave

However [if that is the case then] what does scripture mean by (Ps 94:12) "instruct in Your teaching" [doesn't this imply that an affliction of love ought not affect one's ability to study Torah]? Don't read "תִּלְמְדֵנִי" (you teach him) rather read "תִּלְמְדוּנִי" (you teach us). [The verse then means:] From Your Torah You teach us a *kal vachomer* regarding [what happens when a slave is injured in the] tooth or eye [namely that he is set free]. Just as a tooth or eye are among the limbs of a person [injury to which] a slave is set free, afflictions which purify the whole body, all the more so [a person is freed from bondage to his/her sins]!

ii. Metaphor 2 - salting meat

והיינו דרבי שמעון בן לקיש, דאמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: נאמר "ברית" במלח ונאמר "ברית" ביסורין. נאמר ברית במלח, דכתיב (ויקרא ב') ולא תשבית מלח ברית, ונאמר ברית ביסורין, דכתיב: (דברים כ"ח) אלה דברי הברית. מה ברית - האמור במלח - מלח ממתקת את הבשר, אף ברית האמור ביסורין - יסורין ממרקין כל עונותיו של אדם.

Surely this is the same as what Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish said, for Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish said: the term "covenant" is used in reference to salt and the term "covenant" is used in reference to afflictions. "Covenant" is used in reference to salt: as it is written (Lev. 2: 13): "you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant..." and the term "covenant" is used in reference to afflictions: as it is written (Deut 28:69): "These are the terms of the

covenant"²⁸ Just as when the term covenant is said in reference to salt - salt sweetens the meat, so too when the term "covenant" is said in reference to afflictions - afflictions cleanse all of a person's sins.

5. Role of affliction in bringing three gifts to Israel.

ז תניא²⁹, רבי שמעון בן יוחאי³⁰ אומר: שלש מתנות טובות נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל, וכולן לא נתן אלא על-ידי יסורין. אלו הן: תורה וארץ ישראל והעולם הבא. תורה מנין? - שנאמר: "אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרונו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו". ארץ ישראל? - דכתיב (דברים ח') "כי כאשר ייסר איש את בנו ה' אלהיך מיסרך", וכתיב בתריה: "כי ה' אלהיך מביאך אל ארץ טובה".

העולם הבא? - דכתיב (משלי ו') כי נר מצוה ותורה אור ודרך חיים תוכחות מוסר.

It was taught in a Baraita [that] Shimon b. Yohai said: the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* gave three good gifts to Israel, and they were all only given through afflictions. These are they: Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come. What is the scriptural basis for [the assertion that] Torah [was only given through affliction]? As it says (Ps. 94:12): "Happy is the man whom You discipline (תיסרו), O LORD, the man You instruct in Your teaching (ומתורתך)"

And [what about] Eretz Israel? (Deut 8:5) "...the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son." and in the verse just further on [it says] (Deut 8:7) "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land". And the World to Come? As it is written (Prov. 6:23) "For the commandment is a lamp, The teaching is a light, And the way to life [understood homiletically as referring to the World to Come] is the rebuke that disciplines"³¹ (תוכחות מוסר)."

28. Rashi: this follows the curses. (i.e. the curses are seen as synonymous with afflictions)

29. Versions of this passage are also found in, (see appendix): מכילתא פרשת בחדש פרשה ל' - ספרי פרשת ואתחנן פסקא ז' and Tannaitic midrashic compilations.

30. T5

31. Rashi: a "rebuke that disciplines" brings a person the World to Come.

6. The expiatory powers of Torah study, deeds of lovingkindness and burying one's children.

תני תנא קמיה דרבי יוחנן³²: כל העוסק בתורה ובגמילות חסדים
[ברכות דף ה.ב.]

וקובר את בניו - מוחלין לו על כל עונותיו.

The Tanna (repeater) taught [a Baraita] before Rabbi Yohanan: anyone who engages in Torah study, [performs] acts of lovingkindness and buries his children [i.e. he lives to see the death of his children] - all his sins are forgiven.

a. A challenge is raised by R. Yohanan

אמר ליה רבי יוחנן: בשלמא תורה וגמילות חסדים - דכתיב (משלי ט"ז) "בחסד ואמת יכפר עון" חסד - זו גמילות חסדים, שנאמר (משלי כ"א) "רודף צדקה וחסד ימצא חיים צדקה וכבוד", אמת - זו תורה, שנאמר: (משלי כ"ג) "אמת קנה ואל תמכר" אלא קובר את בניו - מניין?

Rabbi Yohanan said to him: It is well [with regard to] Torah and Gemillut Chasadim [i.e. I can establish their bases] - as it is written (Prov. 16:6) "Iniquity is expiated by (חסד) loyalty and (אמת) faithfulness...". *Chesed* means *Gemillut Chasadim* as it is said (Prov. 21:21): "He who strives to do good and kind deeds Attains life, success, and honor." *Emet* means Torah, as it is said (Prov. 23:23): "Buy truth and never sell it, [And wisdom, discipline, and understanding]." However, what is the scriptural basis for [the assertion that] one who buries his children [will have his sins forgiven]?

b. Response

תנא ליה ההוא סבא משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי³³: אתיא עון, עון, כתיב הכא: "בחסד ואמת יכפר עון", וכתיב התם: (ירמיהו ל"ב) "ומשלם עון אבות אל חיק בניהם".

A certain elder taught [Rabbi Yohanan the answer to his

32. AI2

33. T5

question] in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai: It comes from [a *gezerah shava* linking two mentions of the word] "iniquity". It is written here (Prov. 16:6): "Iniquity is expiated by loyalty and faithfulness..." and it is written elsewhere (Jer. 32:18) "...but visit the iniquity"³⁴ (עון) of the fathers upon their children after them."

c. R. Yohanan won't accept this theoretical response.

אמר רבי יוחנן: נגעים ובנים אינן יסורין של אהבה.

Rabbi Yohanan said: skin sores and "children"³⁵ are not afflictions of love.

d. The Gemara retorts

ונגעים לא? והתניא: כל מי שיש בו אחד מארבעה מראות נגעים הללו - אינן אלא מזבח כפרה -

Skin sores are not [afflictions of love]?

Is it not taught in a Baraita [that]: all who suffers the appearances of one of these four skin sores - these are nothing but an altar of atonement? [The Gemara assumes that "altar of atonement" is the same as "afflictions of love".]

i. Answer I

מזבח כפרה הוּו, יסורין של אהבה לא הוּו.

They are an "altar of atonement" but not "afflictions of love".

34. JPS: "guilt"

35. Rashi: don't even think that this refers to one who buries his children [as we will discover in the gemara to follow it refers to someone who has been unable to have children].

ii. Answer 2ואי בעית אימא: הא לן והא לחו.

And if you prefer say: this [that the Baraita confirms that skin sores can be afflictions of love] applies to us [in Bavel whereas] this [R. Yohanan's assertion that they are not afflictions of love] applies to them [in Eretz Israel].

iii. Answer 3ואי בעית אימא: הא בצנעא, הא בפרהסיא

[Another answer is given:] If you want, say: this [the Baraita's statement that the skin sores may be afflictions of love applies] when they are covered³⁶ whereas this [R. Yohanan's statement that they are not afflictions of love applies] when [the lesions] are exposed.

e. Question about "children"ובנים לא?

[Returning to R. Yohanan's statement that "Skin sores and "children" are not afflictions of love." the Gemara asks:] "children" is not [an affliction of love]?

היכי דמי?

What is this like? [i.e. how might we visualize the case? What does "children" refer to?]

f. Answersאילימא דהוו להו ומתו - והא אמר רבי יוחנן: דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר.

If you say that [the teaching that "children" is not an affliction of love applies when one had children] but they died, then isn't it that Rabbi Yohanan said: "this is the bone of my tenth child [that died]"³⁷.

36. Rashi: under one's clothes.

37. Paraphrasing Rashi: the afflictions visited on such a righteous person as Rabbi Yohanan can only be afflictions of love. Thus the death of children must be an affliction of love.

אלא: הא - דלא הוו ליה כלל, והא - דהוו ליה ומתו.

Rather, this [that "children" is not an affliction of love] [refers to when] someone has never had children at all, whereas this [that "children" is an affliction of love] [refers to when] someone had children but they died.

7. Theory is one thing, practice another.

a. Real life example #1 - Rabbi Hiyya

א רבי חייה בר אבא³⁸ חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך יחב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba was sick, Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: are your afflictions dear to you? [Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba] said to him: neither they nor their reward. [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he healed him³⁹.

b. Real life example #2 - Rabbi Yohanan

רבי יוחנן⁴⁰ חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך יחב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Yohanan was sick. Rabbi Hanina came to visit him. He said to him: are your afflictions dear to you? He replied: neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he healed him.

i. Aside about R. Yohanan's healing powers.

אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה -

Can this be? [Ought not] Rabbi Yohanan have healed himself?

אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

They say [anonymous statement]: A prisoner cannot release himself from prison.

38. AI3

39. Lit. "raised him".

40. AI2

c. Real life example #3 - Rabbi Elazar

- רבי אלעזר⁴¹ חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל, גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא. חזייה דהוה קא בכי רבי אלעזר. אמר ליה: אמאי קא בכית? אי משום תורה דלא אפשר - שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים. ואי משום מזוני - לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות. ואי משום בני - דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר. אמר ליה: להאי שופרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא. אמר ליה: על דא ודאי קא בכית, ובכו תרוייהו. אדהכי והכי, אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ירך, יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Elazar was sick. Rabbi Yohanan came to visit him. [R. Yohanan] saw that [R. Elazar] was in a darkened home. [R. Yohanan] uncovered his arm and light radiated [through the room]. [R. Yohanan] saw that R. Elazar was crying. He said to him: Why are you crying? If it is because of Torah that you desire [to learn more but cannot], then we have learned [in a Mishnah⁴²] that [whether] one [has studied] a great deal or [only] a little, it is only important that directs his heart to heaven. And if it is because of [lack of] food⁴³ - not everyone merits two tables⁴⁴. Perhaps it is because of [the lack of] children - this is a bone from my tenth [dead] child! [R. Elazar] said to him: I am crying because of the beauty⁴⁵ that will rot in the earth. [R. Yohanan] said to him: for this you should certainly cry. And they cried together. In the meantime, R. Yohanan asked him [R. Elazar]: Are your afflictions dear to you? He said to him: neither they nor their reward. [R. Yohanan] said to him: give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he healed him.

41. ?AI3

42. Mishnah Menachot 13:11 - note: said there in reference to giving sacrificial offerings, NOT studying Torah.

43. Rashi: i.e. that he was not wealthy.

44. Soncino Talmud: the two tables are study and wealth. (5b footnote a(8))

45. R. Yohanan was famous for his beauty.

8. The Gemara tries to reaffirm order. God's justice is fair, you just have to look closely.

ב רב הונא⁴⁶ תקיפו ליה ארבע מאה דני דחמרא, על לגביה רב יהודה⁴⁷ אחוה דרב סלא חסידא ורבנן, ואמרי לה: רב אדא בר אהבה⁴⁸ ורבנן, ואמרו ליה: לעיין מר במיליה.

Four hundred barrels of Rav Huna's wine went sour. Rav Yehuda the brother of Rav Sela the Righteous and the Sages (and others say Rav Adda b. Ahavah and the sages) said to him: examine your deeds.⁴⁹

אמר להו: ומי חשידנא בעיניכו?

He replied to them: Am I suspect in your eyes?

אמרו ליה: מי חשיד קודשא בריך הוא דעביד דינא בלא דינא?

They replied to him: Is the *Kudsha Brich Hu* to be held suspect for having meted out justice unjustly?

אמר להו: אי איכא מאן דשמיע עלי מלתא - לימא.

He said to them: If there is someone who has heard something about me [that I have done wrong] - let him say so!

אמרו ליה: הכי שמיע לן: דלא יהיב מר שבישא לאריסיה.

They replied: Thus we have heard: that master [R. Huna] did not give your tenant farmer branches from the vines [that he was legally bound to receive].

אמר להו: מי קא שביק לי מידי מיניה? הא קא גניב ליה כוליה!

He replied: Did he [the tenant farmer] leave behind any of [the branches]? He stole all of them!

אמרו ליה: היינו דאמרי אינשי: בתר גנבא גנוב, וטעמא טעים.

They said to him: We have a folk saying: steal from a thief

46.AB2

47.AB2

48.AB2

49.i.e. examine your deeds to determine what sins you committed that led to this affliction.

and get the taste (of stealing)⁵⁰.

אמר להו: קבילנא עלי דיהיבנא ליה.

He said to them: I receive that which I give him.⁵¹

איכא דאמרי: הדר חלא והוה חמרא. ואיכא דאמרי: אייקר חלא ואיזבן בדמי דחמרא.
There are those who say [that] the spoiled vinegar returned to wine. And there are those who say [that]: the vinegar went up in price and was sold for the same price as wine.

9. A return to the apotropaic effects of bed-related ritual - prayer and the orientation of the bed.

ג תניא, אבא בנימין אומר: על שני דברים הייתי מצטער כל ימי - על תפילתי שתהא לפני מטתי, ועל מטתי שתהא נתונה בין צפון לדרום.
על תפילתי שתהא לפני מטתי - מאי לפני מטתי?
אילימא לפני מטתי ממש - והאמר רב יהודה אמר רב ואיתימא רבי יהושע בן לוי: מנין למתפלל שלא יהא דבר חוצץ בינו לבין הקיר - שנאמר: (ישעיהו ל"ח) ויסב חזקיהו פניו אל הקיר ויתפלל.
לא תימא "לפני מטתי", אלא אימא: סמוך למטתי.
ועל מטתי שתהא נתונה בין צפון לדרום
- דאמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא אמר רבי יצחק: כל הנותן מטתו בין צפון לדרום הויין ליה בנים זכרים, שנאמר (תהלים י"ז) וצפונך תמלא בטנם ישבעו בנים.
רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר: אף אין אשתו מפלת נפלים כתיב הכא: וצפונך תמלא בטנם, וכתוב התם (בראשית כ"ה) וימלאו ימיה ללדת והנה תומים בבטנה.

It was taught in a Baraita: Abba Binyamin says: For my whole life I took trouble over two things - my prayer, that it should be before my bed, and my bed that it should be placed [i.e. orientated] from north to south.

"[I took trouble over] my prayer, that it should be before my bed" - what does this mean "before my bed"?

If you say [that he means] literally "before my bed", then is it not that Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav (and some say that he spoke in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi): What

50.i.e. stealing from a thief is still stealing.

51.i.e. I will give him his required share from now on.

is the scriptural basis [for the practice that] one should not pray while something is interposed between [the pray-er] and the wall? It is said (Isaiah 38:2) "Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD."⁵² Do not say [that he means literally] "before my bed", but rather [that he means] "close [in time] to my bed"⁵³. And [what did he mean by taking trouble with] "my bed that it should be placed [i.e. orientated] from north to south"? As R. Chama said in the name of R. Chaninah, who said in the name of R. Yitchak: everyone who places his bed [orientated] north to south will have male children, as it is said (Ps. 17:14): "But as to Your treasured (וצפונך) ones, fill their bellies. They will be satisfied with sons"⁵⁴.

R. Nachman b. Yitzchak said: also his wife will not [suffer] a miscarriage, [for] it is written here: "But as to Your treasured (וצפונך) ones, fill their bellies. They will be satisfied with sons." And elsewhere it is written (Gen 25:24): "When her time to give birth was at hand"⁵⁵, there were twins in her womb"

52. In other words, Abba Binyamin could not have meant to place his bed between him and the wall while praying.

53. Rashi says that Abba Binyamin would take pains not to do any work or Torah study upon rising from his bed until he had recited shema and prayed.

54. JPS: "Their sons too shall be satisfied,"

55. Lit. "when her time of gestation was full". A connection is being made between the two verses through the word "full" (מלא). Belly is understood to be referring to the womb.

Additional Appendix**מכילתא פרשת בחדש פרשה י'**

רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר חביב יסורי ששלש מתנות טובות נתנו לישראל ואומות העולם מתאווין להם ולא נתנו להם אלא בייסורין. ואלו הן תורה וארץ ישראל ועולם הבא. תורה דכתיב (משלי א') לדעת חכמה ומוסר להבין אמרי בינה (תהלים צ"ד) אשרי הגבר אשר תישרנו יה. ארץ ישראל מנין דכתיב (דברים ח') ה' אלהיך מייסרך ואומר (שם) כי ה' אלהיך מביאך אל ארץ טובה. העולם הבא מנין דכתיב (משלי ו') כי נר מצוה ותורה אור וגו'.

ספרי פרשת ואתחנן פיסקא ז

ר' שמעון בן יוחאי אומר חביבים יסורים ששלש מתנות נתן הקב"ה להם לישראל שאומות העולם מתאווים להן ולא נתנוהו לישראל אלא על ידי ייסורים ואלו הם תורה וארץ ישראל והעולם הבא. תורה מנין שנאמר (משלי א') לדעת חכמה ומוסר ואומר (תהלים צד) אשרי הגבר אשר תישרנו יה ומתורתך תלמדנו. ארץ ישראל מנין ה' אלהיך מייסרך ואומר ה' אלהיך מביאך אל ארץ טובה ארץ נחלי מים עיינות ותהומות יוצאים בבקעה ובהר. העולם הבא מנין שנא' (משלי ו') כי נר מצוה ותורה אור ודרך חיים תוכחות מוסר איזהו דרך שמביא אור לעולם הבא הוי אומר זה ייסורים.

Text Immersion Project

Essays Two and Three

An Examination of *Bavli Berakhot* Chapter One

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Contents

Introduction.....	Page 1
Outline (Essay Two).....	Page 1
Analysis (Essay Three)	Page 39

Introduction

The Talmud can be conceived as, among other things, a record of discussions, real or imagined, that took place over centuries between engaged rabbinic scholars. The purpose of this paper is to listen to their ancient discussions as reflected in chapter one of *b. Berakhot* and to attempt to establish what issues or themes were important to the Rabbis and those who gave the text its final form. We begin with a survey that outlines the first chapter of *b. Berakhot* and then proceed to an in-depth analysis.

Outline of Bavli Berakhot Chapter One

This section comprises an outline of the first chapter of *b. Berakhot*. For practical reasons I have chosen to use the passage divisions employed by Steinsaltz in his Hebrew vocalized edition of this tractate¹. The aim of this enterprise is to establish the sweep of subject matter addressed in the chapter in a manner that will help facilitate the analysis that follows. Many passage summaries are followed by comments that seek to highlight certain characteristics of the passage or to describe how one passage flows from the previous one. Stars next to passage headings indicate my subjective assessment of the suitability for teaching that material in an adult education setting based on a combination of level of difficulty and how interesting the passage is. One star signifies that the passage is somewhat suitable. Three stars indicate that the passage is very suitable and very interesting.

***2a – Aleph- Mishnah 1:1

The Mishnah opens with the question "From when do we read the evening Shema?" Rabbi Eliezer says: From the time the priests enter to eat their Terumah until the end of the first watch. The sages say until midnight. R. Gamliel says until the light of dawn. An episode is recounted

¹ Steinsaltz, A, *Talmud Bavli Masechet Brachot, Hamechon baisraeli l'parsumim talmudiim*, Jerusalem, 1993

whereby Gamliel confirms that the evening shema can be recited until the light of dawn. The Tanna Kamma widens the scope of the time period indicating that R. Gamliel's end time is the legal end time for any mitzvah which the sages ordained until midnight. The reason for the Sages' insistence on the earlier time is reported to be that it would keep people from transgression.

Comment: Note that the Mishnah opens with a question about the recitation of the shema and immediately relates it to the temple cult's schedule: the time at which the priests can eat their terumah (after being purified), until the end of the first watch (in the temple). In contrast the tosefta begins with a different time, one not related to the Temple or even to the priestly caste: "from the time a person goes in to eat his bread on the Sabbath eve".

**2a Bet – Gemara

Two questions are asked, both directly addressing the Mishnah's opening words:

1. Why does the Mishnah begin with an assumption that there is a requirement to recite the Shema in the evening?
2. Why does the Mishnah start with the evening shema rather than the morning shema?

The second question is answered in two ways – firstly in reference to the order in the phrase "when you lie down and when you rise up" and secondly with respect to the creation narrative in Genesis 1 where each day's creation is completed with the phrase "it was evening, it was morning day X". There is a follow up question related to the way the Mishnah later refers to the morning recitation and then returns to the evening. This is resolved by indicating that the text is structured as a chiasm.

Comment: the Gemara comments directly on its Mishnah.

*2a Gimmel

The Gemara wonders why the Mishnah uses an apparently unnecessarily obtuse way for describing the time of recitation rather than the more practical time when the stars come out. It is to teach the additional lesson – that a priest who has contracted ritual impurity and has become pure through immersion waits until the stars come out before eating the *terumah* rather than having to wait to give the atonement offering the next day.

Comment: responds directly to the Mishnah.

2a – Dalet

An extended deliberation of the question as to when the priest becomes purified to eat the *terumah* based on varying interpretations of the relevant scriptural verse (Lev. 22:4-7).

2b – Aleph

Parallel tannaitic material to the opening sentence of our Mishnah is brought and the Gemara addresses the apparent discrepancies between the texts.

2b – Bet

The Gemara works through contradictory tannaitic pronouncements as to when the priests immerse prior to becoming pure.

*3a – Aleph

The Gemara resolves apparent contradictions that appear in the tannaitic material between statements attributed to two tanaaim. The possible explanations are: transmission error in

attribution (R. Meir and R. Eliezer) or a misreading of the text giving an incorrect attribution (R. Eliezer).

**3a – Bet

Commenting on our Mishnah, “[R. Eliezer says that the evening shema may be recited] until the end of the first watch”: the Gemara seeks to establish how many watches there were overnight – and thus how long each one was and introduces the concept that each earthly watch has a corresponding heavenly watch. During each of the watches on earth “God sits and roars like a lion and says: woe to the children on account of whom I destroyed my House and burned my Temple, and exiled them among the nations of the world”.

Comment: the Gemara explicitly refers to the destruction of the Temple here. Its depiction of God gives us an insight into rabbinic theology – God laments the fact that because of the Jews’ sins God destroyed the Temple and exiled them. The correspondence between the watches on earth and God’s words in heaven is not expanded upon here. We are left to contemplate the significance of the parallel between the heavenly events and those on earth. Does the correct timing of the Shema’s recitation somehow reduce God’s grief over the actions that had to be taken?

**3a – Gimmel

A baraita describes an episode where R. Yossi prays in one of the ruins in Jerusalem (strong reference to the destruction of the Temple and its environs) and is met by Elijah who counsels him on the dangers of praying in a ruined building – he should instead pray a short prayer (short form of the Amidah) in the street. We also read that R. Yossi heard the Divine voice within the ruins saying: “woe to the children upon whose account I destroyed my House and

burned my Temple, and exiled them among the nations.” Elijah replies that God says this three times a day (presumably corresponding to the three daily *Tefillot*) and also that when Jews go to their synagogues and places of study and respond together “*Shemei hagadol mevorach*” God “bows the Divine head” (as in prayer) and says “happy is the king whom they praise in the Divine House; but what of the Father who exiled His children? And woe to them the children who were exiled from their Father’s table!”

Comment: A link is forged between Divine lamentation and human prayer especially in the Synagogue and Beit Midrash which are elevated to the status of the Divine House, apparently replacing the destroyed Temple. Again we see a theology in which the Divine laments the punishment that God, regretfully, had to mete out to God’s special children. More explicitly now regular, communal prayer is endowed with the power to elevate the Divine mood.

**3a – Dalet

Linked by R. Yossi’s episode in the ruins of Jerusalem, a Baraita is introduced that gives three reasons why one should not go into a ruin: because of suspicion (of illicit activity on the part of one who goes in there), because the ruins may collapse, and because of the presence of demons. The Gemara seeks to explain why each of the three reasons is required – to account for different, specific circumstances.

Comment: The overall thematic link is with ruined buildings but one wonders if the introduction of the concept of demons may be by way of explaining a source of evil independent of God. Also the possibility of suspicious activity hints at the perceived sins of Israel that were understood to have led to the destruction of the Temple.

*3b – Aleph

The text returns to the discussion (from 3a – *Bet*) about how many watches there were at night: three or four? The text ends with three watches. A tradition attributed to R. Zerika in the name of R. Ami in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi is given.

**3b – Bet

This passage discusses the type of speech one may engage in while in the presence of the dead. Discussions of Torah matters are not permitted because speaking about Torah is a Mitzvah – and dead people are unable to fulfill it. Regular daily discussions are ok because although a dead person cannot engage in such discussions neither is a dead person obligated to engage in them.

Comment: Introduced with the same attribution as the previous sugya, R. Zerika in the name of R. Ami in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi.

3b – Gimme!

Returns to Ps 119:62 that was quoted above in 3b – Aleph in reference to the number of nightly watches. This verse refers to David arising at midnight to thank God. The Gemara tries to establish David's nocturnal habits given an apparently conflicting verse - Ps 119:147 that describes him arising just before dawn or at the outset of the evening depending on the understanding of the term *neshef*.

Comment: linked to a psalm introduced in 3b – Aleph. David is shown as studying Torah and praising God through the night. There is a focus on the delineation of day from night – light from dark.

*3b - Dalet

Explanations of King David's apparent ability to wake at midnight are given. The Gemara contrasts David with Moses, at first indicating that, unlike the king, Moses was not able to discern midnight (from an understanding of Ex. 11:14). This verse is reinterpreted to show that Moses did in fact know how to discern midnight. An aggadic aside portrays the inner workings of David's rule, apparently retrojecting some rabbinic notions of decision-making onto the monarchy. The episode portrays David as aloof from the needs of his people and requiring advisors to bring him to reality. Moses is shown to demonstrate that there are limits of his knowledge and Mar says: Teach your tongue to say "I do not know".

Comment: The clear link is with the previous sugya via King David's nocturnal habits. There is an effort to demonstrate that whatever David could do so too could Moses. This passage seems to reduce the prominence of the monarchy by portraying David as out of touch and showing his need for extensive counsel, including from the Sanhedrin.

**4a - Aleph

David is portrayed as being pious because he spent his time adjudicating on the fine details of family purity and Halakhah and because he was not ashamed to seek counsel with his teacher.

Comment: anachronistic rabbinic portrayal of David. It continues the discussion of David and also links to the previous sugya in which Moses is shown to demonstrate that there are limits of his knowledge and Mar says: Teach your tongue to say "I do not know".

**4a – Bet

This passage uses examples of David, Jacob and the people of Israel in exile to show that reward may not come to one who deserves it because of subsequent or previous sins.

Comment: An explanation for why bad things may happen to good people.

**4a – Gimme!

Commenting on our Mishnah's phrase: "the Sages say: until midnight", the Gemara shows that the Sages actually concurred with R. Gamliel but that they prescribed the earlier time for the end of reciting the evening shema:

- 1) to create a fence around the law,
- 2) to counteract the natural inclination to arrive home, eat, take a nap and possibly sleep through the night without having recited shema, and,
- 3) to demonstrate that the evening shema is obligatory, not optional as some believed.

This obligation has the weight of a capital punishment hanging over the individual.

Comment: Returns directly to our Mishnah. Demonstrates the natural tendency to procrastinate when something may be done over a long period of time.

*4b – Aleph

The importance of linking the recitation of Shema to the Amidah – one who does so is a "*ben ha'Olam ha'Ba*". Connects to the previous passage that mentioned that one ought to "recite shema and [then immediately] pray". (See also 9b – dalet and hey). The apparent interruptions caused by *Hashkiveinu* and *Adonai sefatai tiftach* are resolved (See also 9b – vav).

*4b – Bet

One is a “*ben ha'Olam ha'Ba*” who recites *Ashrei* three times a day. The reason for the importance of this psalm is explained, including the rabbinic etiology for the missing *nun* verse. It is explained that this verse would have referred to the downfall of Israel. It was therefore not included, but found reference in the following verse that describes the Divine power to lift up the fallen.

Comment: This alludes to God's reaction to Israel's downfall – namely that the divine supports Israel when they are down. Linked to the previous sugya through the idea of a “*ben ha'Olam ha'Ba*”

**4b – Gimmel

The speed of four angels – Michael, Gabriel, Elijah and the Angel of Death from fastest to slowest.

Comment: Possibly linked by attribution to R. Elazar bar Avina to 4b – Bet. Note the general theme is angels, some of whom bring about the Divine decrees. It thus alludes to how God's decrees are brought about. The relative slowness of the Angel of Death is understood to reflect the requirement that this angel give its victim ample opportunity to repent.

4b - Dalet

The requirement to recite shema at the bedside in addition to the evening recitation. An exemption is made for Torah scholars.

**5a – Aleph

The Gemara interprets Ps 4:5 that was introduced as a proof text for reciting the Shema at the bedside above (4b –Dalet). It is shown to describe an internal battle between the good and evil inclinations. If the battle is being lost then one should study Torah, recite the Shema or consider the day of death.

Comment: an explanation for human sin – losing the battle between the *yetzer haTov* and the *yetzer haRa*.

*5a – Bet

Linked to the previous passage by the attribution to R. Levi b. Chama in the name of R. Shimon b. Lakish. Exodus 24:12 is expounded as a proof text for the origin of both Written and Oral Torahs – they were all given to Moses at Sinai.

*5a – Gimmel

Picking up again from 5a – *Aleph* the Gemara extols the power of the Shema recitation at the bed to ward off demons. It employs proof texts to do so: Job 5:7 and Prov 23:5.

**5a – Dalet

The same proof texts are used to support the notion that the bedtime recitation wards off *yissurin*, afflictions. God will bring repulsive afflictions to those who are able to but do not engage in the study of Torah. God is not like humans – God gave the Torah, a precious gift, and wants us to keep it.

Comment: God is now a direct source of afflictions.

**5a – Hey

An outline of how to respond to *yissurin*: examine one's actions, then consider neglect of Torah, then, if neither of these are possible causes of the *yissurin* then they afflictions must be "*Yissurin shel ahavah*" (afflictions of love") This concept is explained.

Comment: another explanation to account for hardships experienced by good people.

**5a – Vav

Further explanation of *yissurin shel ahavah*: the status of afflictions that affect a person's ability to study Torah or to pray. The afflictions of love are shown to provide purification from all sins.

**5a – Zayin

The role of affliction in bringing three gifts to Israel: Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come. The expiatory powers of Torah study, deeds of lovingkindness and suffering the loss of one's children. Significant debate erupts regarding this assertion, particularly about the loss of one's children.

**5b – Aleph

A series of episodes where three sick rabbis renounce their afflictions and their reward, apparently in protest of the idea of *yissurin shel ahavah*.

**5b – Bet

An aggadah in which the afflicted person searches his deeds to explain the affliction (which is that his store of wine sours). At first no explanation can be found but on deeper examination a sin is exposed. Repentance from this sin reverses the affliction.

5b - Gimmel

The protective power of the night-time shema recitation. The effects of the bed's orientation for reproductive success.

Comment: this returns us to the discussion of bedtime Shema recitation that started at 4b - *Dalet* and was last addressed at 5a – *Dalet*

**5b – Dalet

A baraita in the name of Aba Binyamin is introduced that exhorts the one who finishes his prayers to wait for his fellow before leaving. Punishments arise for failing to follow this rule. Rewards accrue for those who practice it.

Comment: This is linked with the previous passage through the recounting of actions whose performance can result in Divine reward or punishment. Note that this begins a series of baraitot in the name of Aba Binyamin.

***6a – Aleph

A second baraita in the name of Aba Binyamin. This outlines the belief that we are surrounded continuously by invisible demons that cause numerous annoyances – e.g. pushing and shoving at *kallot*, the tiredness of legs, wearing out of clothes. Ways to detect the demons and to see them are outlined.

Comment: this is connected through the attribution to the previous passage but it may also represent another perspective on causes for afflictions – Demons also cause bad things to happen. In addition, it adds to earlier references to demons – 5a – *Gimmel* and 3a – *Dalet*, as well as to the mention of Angels – 4b – *Gimmel* as potential sources of suffering other than directly from God.

***6a – Bet

Final baraita attributed to Aba Binyamin. A new series is introduced, linked by the attribution to R. Avin [/Ravin] b. Rav Ada in the name of R. Yithak. Explains the benefits of: Praying in a synagogue, praying in a minyan, having a court of three, two studying Torah, one who intended to do a mitzvah but was prevented, one who studies Torah on his own. For each a proof text is given in the Gemara and then explanations are given as to why each needed its own proof text, given that one might have thought that each could be derived from the fact that the *Shekhinah* dwells with even a single person studying Torah.

Comment: This passage highlights the belief that the *Shekhinah* is present in a variety of situations – of note these situations are not related to Temple cult but rather to prayer in the synagogue, Torah study and rabbinical courts. This represents an example of rabbinic practice taking on some of the characteristics of the Temple cult – since the Temple had been the place where the *Shekhinah* dwelled until it was destroyed.

**6a – Gimmel

A discussion of God's Tefillin. Proof texts are provided to establish that God does in fact don them and details are given as to the contents.

Comment: Linked by attribution and by the association of the recitation of the morning shema with the wearing of tefillin (which contain the Shema passage). God's wearing of Tefillin is portrayed as being reciprocal for Israel's unique love for God, it reiterates God's love for Israel. Just as Israel has the Shema passage in the worldly tefillin, God's tefillin contain a statement about Israel's uniqueness (1 Chr. 17:21). The implied question may be: If this is so, then why are we in exile? Or, have no fear, ultimately God will redeem us.

**6b – Aleph

Final attribution to Ravin b. R. Ada in the name of R. Yithak: God notices the occasions when those who regularly pray don't show up. If the absence is due to the performance of another mitzvah then that is ok. If it is due to a non-obligatory reason then it is not ok and demonstrates a lack of faith in God's providence.

*6b – Bet

Thematically linked by God keeping track of those who are praying. The Gemara teaches that God becomes angry when God comes to a synagogue and finds less than ten people praying together. Also, one ought to fix a place for prayer, just as Abraham did. A new attribution is introduced: R Chelbo in the name of R. Huna.

*6b – Gimel

Commencing with a statement attributed to R Chelbo in the name of R. Huna, this passage teaches that one ought not to run out of a synagogue but may run into one, even on Shabbat.

**6b – Dalet

A series, composed in a standard format, that describes the origins of rewards that are associated with doing certain deeds. – Attending lectures (this is the link to the previous passage); studying oral traditions, visiting mourners/guarding a body; fasting; giving a eulogy; celebrating.

*6b – Hey

Continuing from the rules about conduct surrounding synagogues (6b – Gimmel), and returning to a statement attributed to R. Huna the Gemara proceeds to relay that one should not pray facing in the opposite direction from the rest of the congregation because it makes it appear as if there are two powers that are being worshipped.

Comment: this is a record of rabbinic opposition specifically to dualist theologies such as Zoroastrianism (and perhaps Gnosticism). Rules pertaining to behavior around synagogues arise again next in 8b – Aleph, below.

6b – Vav

An explanation of the phrase “*kerum zulut l’bnai adam*” in the second part of Ps. 12:9. This verse was introduced in the previous passage as a prooftext against praying behind a synagogue. The two explanations are that it refers to taking prayer lightly (Rashi) or that it decries creditors who harass a borrower in public.

6b – Zayin

Returning to a statement attributed to R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna: one should be diligent about the Mincha prayer like Eliyahu the prophet with the priests of Baal. Two more

statements follow – the first exhorts diligent observance of the evening prayer, the second exhorts diligent observance of the morning prayer.

**6b – Chet

Another statement attributed to R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna: Great rewards accrue to those who help make a groom happy on his wedding day. Three are suggested: he merits Torah; he is like one who provides a thanksgiving sacrifice; and he is like someone who has built one of the ruins of Jerusalem.

Comment: the topic of the ruins of Jerusalem returns. Making the groom happy is likened to offering sacrifice in the Temple.

**6b – Tet

Another statement attributed to R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna: The prayers of one who reveres heaven will be heard. The Gemara goes on to expound the scriptural proof-text (Eccl 12:13) to demonstrate that the whole world was created only for the sake of those who revere heaven and perform mitzvot.

Comment: this theology is especially particularistic and exclusive. Note Schottenstein's problematic footnotes 60-62 on 6b⁵ that call into question purpose the rest of creation².

**6b – Yud

Another statement attributed to R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna: Exhorts one to greet others, even the poor. Not doing so robs them of the only thing they have: their dignity.

Comment: Seems only to be linked as part of a series of statements with the same attribution.

² Goldwurm, H. (Ed.), *Tractate Shabbos*, vol 1, Mesorah Publications, 2nd Ed. 1999.

***7a – Aleph

This passage contains four main elements. Firstly, we learn that God prays. Secondly, we learn what prayer God recites. Thirdly, we learn that God, at least sometimes, “wants” to be blessed by humans. Finally, we learn from this that we as humans ought to value the blessings of even ordinary mortals. One fascinating aspect of this passage is the gross anthropomorphism expressed in the R. Yishmael b. Elisha’s encounter with God in the Holy of Holies. But perhaps most fascinating is the prayer that God recites to Godself³, that bears repeating here: “May it be My will that My mercy will overpower My anger, that My mercy will be revealed over My [other] attributes, and that I will behave towards My children with mercy and on their behalf stop short of the bounds of strict justice.”

Comment: This passage is remarkable for the theology that it implies. God is portrayed as praying. God apparently desires human prayer. But what is most fascinating is that of all the things that God could be portrayed as praying for: world peace, harmony in the home, the return of God’s children to their Land, the end of human sin, God is shown to pray that God’s own attributes will be balanced towards mercy. The implication is that sometimes God’s anger and sterner attributes overpower God’s mercy. This may account for part of the observed imbalance between a person’s actions and rewards or punishments.

***7a – Bet

Linked to the previous passage through both attribution (R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yossi) and theme (anger, particularly God’s), this passage suggests that for a very brief

³ Judging from the footnotes in Schottenstein, the commentators had a real problem with this theology. God is in control of the Divine mood. Why does God need to pray? The two answers provided are that God is demonstrating to humans how to pray and, turning the text “on its head”, that God is praying that humans act in righteous ways that allow God to act with mercy rather than strict judgment.

moment God is in a state of anger. During this moment the divine fury can result in punishments that are relatively harsh compared with the times when God is more merciful. Humans, other than Bilaam, cannot predict when this moment will occur. The passage is prefaced with the advice not to appease a person at the moment when he/she is angry.

Comment: perhaps this provides a rabbinic theology to explain those disasters that take only a moment to occur – a tree falling on a house, killing the occupants; an earthquake; a tsunami. During these brief moments God's untamed anger is manifest in the world.

**7a – Gimmel

Continued discussion of God's moment of anger. The question of when this moment occurs is raised and answers are provided. Two explicit lessons are taught: we ought to leave the punishment of heretics to God and repentance brought about through self-reproach is better than that brought about through punishment.

Comment: Human attempts to harness God's anger for their own purposes are futile.

***7a - Dalet

The text explicitly raises the question as to why the righteous suffer and evil-doers are rewarded. The explanation, from the mouth of God to Moses is that it all relates to the behavior of the parent. The righteous person who is punished must be the child of an evil person. An evil person who is rewarded must be the child of a righteous person, etc.

Comment: continues to be linked to the previous passages via the general theme of explaining evil as well as by attribution to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yossi.

**7a – Hey

This passage challenges the theology of the previous passage, that children are punished for the sins of their parents. Alternative answers are given. The first is that reward and punishment depends on whether the children follow in their parents' ways or not. Thus the son of a righteous person who himself acts wickedly is punished, the son of an evil person who acts righteously is rewarded etc. The other explanation introduces the notion of complete and incomplete righteousness. Incompletely righteous people experience evil, the completely righteous do not. There is also aggadic material that expands on Moses' seeing God. We learn that Moses saw the knot on the back of God's head tefillin.

Comment: The discussion of theodicy continues.

**7a – Vav

Any positive promise that issues from God's mouth is always fulfilled, at least eventually. Scriptural proofs are given.

Comment: continues the attributions to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yossi. Perhaps this functions as a kind of *nehemta* reminding us that, despite the prolonged exile, God's promise to redeem the people will eventually be fulfilled.

***7b – Aleph

A series of four brief teachings.

1: Abraham was the first person to call God "Lord".

2: A verse in the book of Daniel is linked to Abraham's calling God "Lord".

3: The maxim that was encountered in 7a – *Bet*, not to appease a person while he/she is angry is repeated.

4: Leah was the first to offer thanks to God when she gave thanks upon the birth of Judah (Gen 29:35). Rashi indicates that this thanks was because Leah recognized that she had been given more than an equal share of progeny.

Comment: Teachings 1, 3 and 4 are linked by attribution R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. Teaching 2 relates directly to teaching 1. The fourth teaching, about Leah could be used for a powerful study of gratitude. If we all saw our lot as more than we deserve we can be more content and thankful for what we have rather than continually looking beyond us to what we don't already have.

*7b – Bet

Explanations are given for the names of Reuven and Ruth. Reuven relates to Leah's prophecy about the difference between her son Reuven and Esav. The name Ruth comes from the same root as "to be sated" and this alludes to her being an ancestor of David who sated God with songs and praises. Finally, scriptural basis is asserted for the prophetic significance of names.

Comment: The link is via the reference to Leah in the fourth teaching above. The final teaching about the prophetic significance of names frames the passage and may cause the reader to consider the significance of all the teachings about names in 7b –Aleph and Bet. These teachings might be especially suitable for conversion ceremonies or baby-namings to convey the potential power of a name.

*7b – Gimmel

The torment that occurs when an evil child grows up in a family is greater than the greatest war (between Gog and Magog). The example given is David's son Absalom. An explanation is

given as to why psalm 3 begins with the superscript “song of David” when the events might lead one to expect a “lament of David”. We are taught that David was relieved to discover the identity of the one who would rise up against him out of his household. A legitimate son would show more mercy than a slave or a *mamzer*.

Comment: Linked by attribution to 7b – Aleph. Could be used as a text to discuss raising rebellious teenagers and family systems.

**7b – Dalet

A dispute over whether one may contend with evil doers. That at least some evil doers prosper in this world is taken for granted. It seems that the conclusion reached is that one ought to avoid contending with evil doers unless: it is a matter of heaven; the evil doer is not prospering; and the contender considers himself/herself to be completely righteous. These criteria would seem to rule out contending with evildoers in most situations.

Comment: Linked via attribution to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. The text continues to explore the nature of evil and the reality that evildoers prosper. It also reminds the reader that few people are completely righteous.

*7b – Hey

Fixing a place for one's prayer protects one from enemies. At first Israel's enemies want to torment her but later they want to destroy her.

Comment: linked by both attribution to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai.

**7b – Vav

Serving one who studies Torah is greater than studying Torah itself.

Comment: linked by attribution to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai. May give a clue as to the workings of the rabbinic hierarchy whereby students were expected to serve their teachers.

7b – Zayin

An episode illustrates the importance of praying in a *minyan*. The passage concludes by saying that those who engage in the study of Torah, do deeds of loving kindness and pray will be credited with redeeming God and God's people from exile among the nations.

Comment: Explicit statement about the power of prayer to effect redemption. Of note, prayer is third in the list. Studying Torah and doing acts of loving kindness precede prayer. Includes a final statement attributed to R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai.

***8a – Aleph

Just as being present in a *minyan* can redeem God and God's people from exile, absenting oneself from the synagogue can result in the individual's exile and the exile of that person's progeny. The presence of elderly sages in Bavel, which seems contrary to Deut 11:21 that implies long life is reserved for those who dwell in the Land of Israel, is due to Babylonian sages' practice of arriving early in the morning for prayer and remaining late into the evening after prayer at the synagogue. Note the explicit reference to a verse from the second paragraph of the shema.

Comment: clear thematic link with the previous passage. Could provide an excellent textual basis for a discussion about the importance of the synagogue in Jewish continuity.

**8a – Bet

Interpretations for the phrase “*et matzo*” (*Ps 32:6*). Based on the use of the root *mem tzadi aleph*, five possibilities are presented for times of need: first, at the time of marriage; second, when studying Torah; third, just before death, to ask for a pleasant death; fourth, at the time of burial (the soul prays for a timely burial); fifth, the privy. During the explanation of the third interpretation above, there is an aside into the 903 ways of death and which is the worst and which is the most peaceful.

Comment: the previous passage dealt with location of prayer and the importance of praying in community. This passage highlights especially important times of need during which praying is necessary.

8a – Gimme!

Since the destruction of the Temple God dwells only within the four cubits of Halakhah. The place of halakhic decision making is more beloved to God than the places of study or synagogues.

Comment: This passage is the first in a series of teachings attributed to Rav Chiya b. Ami in the name of Ullah. It hints at limits to God’s power.

8a – Dalet

- a) One who delights in his labors is greater than one who fears heaven. (the commentators quickly explain that the first individual delights in his labors in addition to fearing heaven).
- b) A man should live in the place of his teacher, provided that the student can accept being subordinate to his teacher.

- c) Do not leave the Synagogue during the public Torah reading.

Comment: a) and b) above are attributed to Rav Chiya b. Ami in the name of Ullah. C) is attributed to another sage.

8a – Hey

Practices with regard to reading Torah and Targum in advance of Shabbat's communal reading.

Reading the whole Torah in advance of Yom Kippur

Three instructions R. Yehoshua b. Levi gave his sons:

- a) complete the weekly Torah reading with the community – in Hebrew twice and Targum once
- b) The correct way to slaughter chickens
- c) A wonderful metaphor for regarding a scholar who, with age, has lost his/her learning: they are like the broken tablets of law that were lovingly placed in the Ark of the Covenant along with the whole ones.

Comment: each topic is linked to the previous one through a theme or by being included incidentally in a baraita that contains a teaching that speaks to the topic under discussion.

**8b – Aleph

Three instructions Rava gave his sons:

- a) Do not cut meat on your hand
- b) Do not sit on the bed of an Aramean woman.
- c) Do not pass behind a synagogue when the congregation is praying.

Between and following Rava's instructions the Gemara introduces explanations and clarifications. For a) – it is either because of danger, or to avoid spoiling the meal; for b) this means not to create a bed that is like that of an Aramean who does not say Shema before bed, or don't marry an Aramean, or literally don't sit on an Aramean's bed; for c) the rule does not apply when there is more than one door to the synagogue, or when there is no other synagogue in town, or when not busy carrying a load, or when not wearing tefillin.

Comment: The clearest link with the previous passage is that this is another set of three instructions given by a sage to his sons. Also, like the previous passage, one instruction relates to cutting meat (Rava) which is thematically similar to slaughtering chickens (R. Yehoshua b. Levi). The third instruction relates to proper behavior around a place of worship – a theme that was encountered above in passages 6b - *gimmel, hey*.

8b – Bet

Two *Baraitot* consisting of sets of three attributes that endear a national group to a sage:

1) Three reasons why R. Akiva loves the Medes:

- a. They cut meat on the table.
- b. They kiss only on the hand.
- c. They only meet (in a council) in the open field. (Followed by a proof-text).

2) Three reasons why R. Gamliel loves the Persians:

- a. They are modest with their eating.
- b. They are modest when going to the toilet.
- c. They are modest with something else (Rashi says: sex).

The praise of Persians is followed by another Baraita that reflects a contrary view of them – namely that they are prepared for *Gehinom*. No explicit reason is given.

Comment: the pattern of threes continues from 8a – *hey* and 8b – *aleph*. R. Akiva's *Baraita* begins with a comment on cutting meat, providing another link with the preceding passages. This passage completes *asugya*.

**8b – Gimmel

Returning to our Mishnah "R. Gamliel says [one may recite the evening Shema] until the light of dawn etc.." The Gemara states that the Halakhah is with R. Gamliel. Two *Baraitot* are introduced that explore the status of the period of time between the light of dawn and sunrise. The conclusion is that during this period of time one may fulfill one's obligation to recite either the evening or the morning shema but not both.

Comment: This passage relates directly to the Mishnah.

**9a – Aleph

Quoting the next part of the Mishnah, the Gemara explains the episode with R. Gamliel and his sons, specifically what questions they asked and why.

Comment: relates directly to the Mishnaic text.

9a – Bet

A complicated clarification of the next part of the Mishnah "*ve lo zu bilvad...*" – namely trying to establish whether R. Gamliel was quoting his own teaching or that of the Sages.

Comment: relates directly to our Mishnah.

9a – *Gimmel*

The Gemara responds to our Mishnah's comment (by R. Gamliel) that all the mitzvot about which the rabbis said "until midnight" may in fact be performed up until the light of dawn. Several such mitzvot are specifically mentioned but not the Pesach offering. The Gemara produces a Baraita that contradicts our Mishnah by specifically including the eating of the pesach offering in the mitzvot that extend until the light of dawn. The Gemara then explains the apparent contradiction by ascribing our Mishnah and the Baraita respectively to R. Elazar b. Azaryah and R. Akiva. Their views are expounded and then their disagreement is shown to be parallel to a disagreement between two other Tannaim namely R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. Finally the disagreement is shown to revolve around the understanding of the term "*chipazon*": R. Elazar b. Azaryah holds that it refers to midnight while R. Akiva holds that it refers to the dawn.

Comment: this complicated passage derives from our Mishnah. After much debate no clear decision is reached.

*9a – *Dalet*

This is an aggadic passage that explains God's request to Moses to tell the Israelites to ask the Egyptians for silver and vessels of gold (Ex. 11:2). God's request stems from a divine desire to fulfill a promise made to Abraham (Gen. 15:13-14) The need for the term "*na*"(please) is that the Israelites were in such a hurry to leave their slavery that they would not have been concerned to wait for the riches and would have left without them. In so doing, the divine promise to Abraham would not have been fulfilled.

Comment: this arises from the previous passage's discussion of the events of the night when Israel was redeemed from Egypt.

*9 b – Aleph

This is another aggadah. It expounds on the Israelites receiving goods from the Egyptians prior to their departure. It explores the nature of the transaction and the state in which Egypt was left.

Comment: this aggadah continues to elucidate the events surrounding the departure from Egypt.

***9b – Bet

Another aggadic exposition. This relates to the episode of Moses at the burning bush and provides a midrashic explanation for God's name: "*ehye asher ehyeh*". This name alludes, according to the midrash, to God's promise to be present in this time of affliction (Egypt) and future afflictions (future exiles). A similar double expression is also expounded (I Kings 18:37) in which Elijah says "Answer me, Adonai, answer me".

Comment: it is interesting that after talking about the redemption from Egypt the subject of the Gemara returns to later exiles. The implicit message seems to be that God will redeem those in the current exile, just as God redeemed those in Egypt in biblical times.

9b – Gimmel- Mishnah 1:2

The times for reciting the morning shema.

**9b – Dalet - Gemara

Seeks to clarify the earliest permissible time for beginning to recite the shema. The “*vatin*” link the *geulah* to the *tfillah* (see 4b – *Aleph*) and thus establish the ideal time to recite shema – just before the sunrise. (See also 8b – *Gimmel*).

Comment: directly addresses the material in our Mishnah.

*9b – Hey

Aggadic material lauding the protective value of connecting the *Geulah* to the *Tfillah*.

9b – Vav

This passage resolves the problem of “*Adonai s’fatai tiftach*” and “*Hashkiveynu*” separating *Geulah* from *Tfillah*. (See also 4b – *Aleph*).

9b – Zayin

In the previous passage R. Yochanan mentions that “*Yihyu L’ratzon*” is at the end of the Amidah. This passage explores the reason for this and in the process establishes that the first two psalms in the Book of Psalms are to be understood as one. A teaching about Psalm 104 is offered as a proof that psalms one and two should be understood as one psalm. Psalm 104:35, “Let sinners cease from the earth...”, will be the topic of the next passage.

Comment: this passage addresses a topic alluded to in the previous passage.

***10a – Aleph

An episode where Beruriah, the wife of R. Meir teaches her husband the correct meaning of Ps. 104:35 one should pray for the end of sin, not the destruction of sinners. This is followed

by another episode where Beruriah expounds on the meaning of a scriptural verse (Is. 54:1), this time for a Sadducee/heretic. The lesson is that having no children is better than having wicked children.

Comment: connects to the previous passage through Ps. 104. Great passage for exploring the role of women in the Talmud, as well as for exploring issues of evil and repentance. This passage begins a series of passages that expound on various scriptural verses, ending at 10a – Dalet.

*10a – Bet

This is another episode in which a heretic questions the meaning of a scriptural verse. This time R. Abahu is asked the question. The answer includes a proof for the rabbinic hermeneutic tool of juxtaposition, upon which the explanation of the verse rests.

Comment: this is a good passage for exploring rabbinic hermeneutics.

***10a – Gimme!

An exposition of a series of five verses taken from various Psalms (including Ps. 104, last seen in 10a – Aleph), shown to reflect various stages of King David's life. The commentators ascribe mystical meanings to the five stages. Etiological explanations are given for the location of female breasts.

Comment: continues to expound scriptural verses, including Psalm 104 which first arose in 9b – Zayin. This could be an interesting passage to study rabbinic notions of life's stages and the role of women in their worldview. It is interesting to reflect on the effect of reading about women's roles as child-bearers and child-rearers coming shortly after passages recounting the

Torah knowledge of Beruriah. Could this function as “corrective”/ counterbalance whereby the Rabbis sought to ensure that women would be put in their “proper place”?

***10a – Dalet

A number of beautiful concepts are presented describing the nature of God and the nature of souls, commencing as an explication of Psalm 103 to which reference was made in the previous passage. God is portrayed as creator, not only of forms, but also as the One who, unlike humans, can infuse those forms with spirit, breath and innards and even creates a form within a form (as in pregnancy). The soul’s relationship to the body is compared to God’s relationship to the world.

Comment: linked to the previous passage as an exegesis of a scriptural verse, through Ps 103 and through the general topic of human reproduction. This would be a wonderful passage to spark discussion of Jewish views about God and the nature of souls. This passage completes a series of linked passages of scriptural exegesis that began at 10a – Aleph.

**10a – Hey

God is portrayed as resolving a difficult dilemma that revolved around the status of a King vs. a Prophet of Israel. God afflicts Hezekiah with an illness forcing Isaiah to visit him. But Isaiah brings news that Hezekiah is (according to rabbinic understanding) going to die both in this world and the next. Hezekiah presents reasons why he ought to be spared such an awful punishment, included among them is the assertion that he joined the *Geulah* to *Tfillah*.

Comment: This passage begins a series about King Hezekiah and returns us to the topic of the protective power of juxtaposing the *Geulah* to *Tfillah*, last addressed in 9b – Hey. This passage also shows Hezekiah praying for mercy even after Isaiah has told him of his fate since “Even if

a sharp sword rests upon a person's neck, he should not refrain from [praying] for mercy". This passage could be valuable in discussing Jewish approaches to end of life issues.

10b – Aleph

King Hezekiah was lauded for three things and not lauded for three things. The third action for which he was not lauded was the intercalation of a second month of Nisan instead of adding a second Adar.

Comment: This passage continues to portray King Hezekiah in mixed terms.

10b – Bet

Using Hezekiah's prayer in 10a Hey (Isaiah 38:3) as a trigger, the Gemara demonstrates that when one prays on the basis of one's own merit the reward will be based on the merit of others. When one prays on the basis of the merit of others the reward will be based on one's own merit.

Comment: This continues a series based on Hezekiah's conduct. Lessons in humility and the power of praying in the name of worthy ancestors as is done in the Amidah.

*10b - Gimmel

In 10a – Hey the episode where the Shunamite woman provided lodging for the Prophet Elisha was referred to (II Kings 4). The details of the construction of Elisha's room are expounded. The permissibility of receiving the support of others is outlined. The ability of women to recognize the character of their house guests is testified, particularly the Shunamite woman's ability to discern Elisha's holiness and the lack of holiness in his servant Gehazi. Hosting a Torah scholar is compared with bringing a Tamid offering to the altar.

Comment: Seems to be linked only through the topic of Elisha's lodging which was raised in 10a – Hey. Parts of this could be useful in discussing the value of home hospitality and rabbinic views on women.

**10b – Dalet

Several teachings about praying: don't pray on an elevated surface; keep legs together when praying; utter prayer humbly; don't eat before praying.

Comment: relates to the topic of prayer and also continues attribution to R. Yossi in the name of R. Chaninah in the name of R. Elazar b. Yaakov. Could be good to discuss with adult learners our posture during prayer, prayer's setting etc.

*10b – Hey

The Gemara comments directly on the final phrases of our Mishnah. The Halakhah is that one may recite the morning Shema until the third hour as per R. Yehoshuah. It is preferable to recite the Shema in its correct time but after this time one who recites it is considered as one who reads Torah. The blessings before and after may be recited even when recited after the correct time has elapsed.

Comment: the Halakhah is decided. The references to the blessings before and after the Shema allude to the Mishnah that follows (11a - *Dalet*, Mishnah 4) .

10b – Vav - Mishnah 1:3

Beit Shammai understands Deut. 6:7 "when you lie down and when you rise up" to mean that the evening Shema should be recited lying down and the morning Shema should be recited standing. Beit Hillel understands the verse as referring to the time of day that recitation

should take place, i.e. at the time when people go to sleep and the time when people awaken, rather than the position during recitation.

*11a – Aleph - Gemara

Our Mishnah includes a refutation of Beit Shammai's position by Beit Hillel, but not the reverse. The Gemara seeks to rectify this by offering Beit Shammai's refutation to Beit Hillel's position. It includes a discussion about the circumstances under which one may be exempt from the recitation of Shema.

Comment: follows directly from our Mishnah.

**11a – Bet

An aggadic passage that confirms Beit Hillel's conclusion about the correct position during the recitation of the Shema. We also have an insight into the importance of sages setting an example to their students who adduce the Halakhah from watching the actions of their teachers.

Comment: continuation of the discussion from the previous passage. This passage could form the basis for a discussion about the power of our actions to speak louder than our words in influencing our children and students.

*11a – Gimme!

Aggadic and Halakhic material arguing the necessity of following the rulings of Beit Hillel over those of Beit Shammai.

Comment: returns us to the final phrase of Mishnah 1:3. Interesting passage showing how Beit Hillel's rulings usually trump Beit Shammai's.

11a – Dalet - Mishnah 1:4

Details of the blessings recited before and after the recitation of the Shema.

***11a – Hey

Gemara – Explains why the *Yotzer* prayer in the morning is not recited exactly as per its biblical source (Isaiah 45:7). “The one who makes peace and creates evil” is changed to “...and creates everything” - the language is euphemistic. The first part of the phrase “...forms light and creates darkness” is not altered because the prayer in the morning must make mention of the night during the day. Similarly the equivalent blessing in the evening makes mention of the day during the night.

Comment: A good text for discussing some liturgical changes introduced by the Reform movement, such as “who gives life to all” rather than “who revives the dead” in the Amidah.

*11b – Aleph

A dispute about the wording of the second blessing before the morning Shema.

Comment: relates directly to the Mishnah.

***11b – Bet

An interchange about the blessings that must be said before studying Torah and other texts when doing so prior to reciting the Shema. The second blessing before the Shema, “*Ahavah Rabah*”, includes a blessing for studying Torah.

Comment: This appears to arise from the previous passage that centered on the “*Ahavah Rabah*” blessing. Great passage for discussing Torah study.

11b - *Gimmel*

The Gemara brings a Mishnah (Tamid 5:1) that describes the early morning order of service at the Temple. This Mishnah speaks of one blessing that is recited prior to the Shema. The Gemara attempts to elucidate which of the two blessings is recited and whether each of the two blessings is dependent on the recitation of the other and whether retaining the order is essential.

Comment: Linked by the discussion of the blessings before the morning Shema. Complicated argumentation.

***12a - *Aleph*

The explanation for the abolition of the regular recitation of the Ten Commandments described in M. Tamid 5:1 is explored. The prayer recited by the new week's Temple guards to the leaving guards is identified.

Comment: interesting passage for discussion of liturgical development. The blessing of the arriving Temple guards to the leaving guards is an example of a beautiful blessing, a variation of which could be incorporated into modern liturgy.

12a - *Bet*

The Gemara considers the next phrase in our Mishnah regarding the type of blessing that ought to be recited. The question raised is: what is the Halakhah when one begins a blessing with the wrong intent and then completes it with the correct intent? Is the correct conclusion sufficient to fulfill the obligation? The answer depends on the specific circumstance.

Comment: This relates to the next part of the Mishnah and has no relationship to the previous passage. Complicated argumentation.

**12a – Gimmel

The Gemara discusses the correct choreography during the recitation of a blessing.

Comment: Begins a series of teachings attributed to Rabbah b. Chanina the elder in the name of Rav.

*12b – Aleph

The Gemara discusses changes in some concluding blessings that occur during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Comment: Connected by attribution and by theme – concluding blessings.

12b – Bet

An exhortation to pray for God's mercy on others who are ill. One should even make oneself sick over the ill-health of a Torah scholar.

Comment: Linked by attribution.

12b – Gimmel

Embarrassment can act as an important component of atonement. Exegeses of certain of King Saul's sins are presented. The manner in which he achieved atonement is discussed.

Comment: Linked by attribution. Also discusses atonement, perhaps alluding to 12b – *Aleph*, above, which addressed the Days of Repentance. The beginning of this passage could be of interest to a general congregational audience but the remainder is quite complicated.

**12b – Dalet

The Gemara records a discussion in which different scriptural passages were suggested to be recited as part of the Shema and why they were excluded. One reason proffered is “*Torech haTzibur*” (to avoid burden to the congregation). The text then goes on to provide explanations for the choice to include “*Parshat Tzitzit*” (Num. 15:37-41).

Comment: This passage does not relate to the previous passages and does not seem to speak directly to our Mishnah. It of course addresses an important issue with respect to the composition of *Kriat Shema* but why it is discussed here eludes me. Perhaps its mention of the exodus from Egypt ties it to our next Mishnah.

12b – Hey- Mishnah 1:5

The mitzvah to remember/mention the exodus from Egypt at night, its proof text and explanations of the phrase “all the days of your life” (Deut 16:3).

***12b- Gemara

The Gemara discusses whether the exodus from Egypt will be remembered in the Messianic Days. Some say it will be remembered, only it will be less prominent than the latest redemption. Others say it will be forgotten and replaced in memory by the latest redemption.

Comment: Springs from the subject of our Mishnah but viewing the events of Egypt through the lens of the final redemption lends an uplifting, *nehemta*-like quality to the final part of the first chapter. This passage would be great for adult learners because it is reasonably straight forward, includes some standard Talmudic dialectics and raises interesting questions.

**13a – Aleph

The previous passage introduced the example of God changing Jacob's name to Israel. Although Israel is the new name, the name Jacob is not forgotten, rather it becomes subordinate to the name Israel (arguing that the exodus from Egypt will not be forgotten, but will be subordinate to the future redemption). This present passage discusses the meaning of the names Abram/Abraham and Sari/Sarah as well as whether it is permissible to refer to Abraham as Abram, Sarah as Sari and Israel as Jacob.

Comment: Linked to the previous passage as explained above. Also puts forward the idea that Abraham and Sarah were destined to be the ancestors of many nations, again declaring a hopeful message for Jews still living as a minority and in exile.

Analysis

The previous section of this paper consists of a passage-by-passage outline of the material covered in the first chapter of *b. Berakhot*. Scattered comments explain what may connect one passage to the next especially when the topics shift from one passage to the next for reasons that are unclear. As we've seen in some cases one passage follows the previous one through a topical link, for example, 3b-*gimmel* introduces the topic of King David waking at midnight to thank God. The following passage, 3b-*dalet*, picks up this topic and explores it in more detail. In other cases the link is via a quote, such as in 3a-*gimmel* that incorporates a quote found in the previous passage: God's lament "woe to the children upon whose account I destroyed my House and burned my Temple and exiled them among the nations". In still other cases the link seems to be through attribution to a particular sage, such as 5a – *bet*. Sometimes more than one of these factors, or still other factors account for the link between one passage and the next.

This present section turns from accounting for immediate links – one passage to the next – to broader questions: What overall themes does the Gemara address in chapter one? To what extent is the Gemara overall “on topic” with respect to the Mishnah and to what extent does the Gemara “wander off topic”? When the Gemara does seem to stray from the Mishnah’s immediate subject where does it “go”, and why might it do so? Ultimately the aim is to establish what such tangents might indicate about the Bavli authorship’s interests, worldview and concerns.

I would suggest that in the process of studying the first chapter of *b. Berakhot* one can discern certain prominent themes. Specifically, the *sugyot* of the Gemara can be divided thematically into four broad groups. It must be acknowledged from the outset that the process of defining these four groups and placing individual passages within them is, to some degree at least, unavoidably subjective. One could reasonably come up with different thematic groups than the four that I identified. Some individual passages could justifiably be classified in more than one group. However, I believe that the general conclusions drawn from this process hold up convincingly notwithstanding some inbuilt subjectivity and imprecision.

The first group consists of those passages that directly address the corresponding Mishnah’s arguments or subject matter. For example Mishnah 1:1 defines when the evening Shema should be recited. The Gemara that immediately follows begins by questioning the Mishnah’s assumptions (2a – *Bet*) and then proceeds to clarify the Mishnah’s rulings about the timing of the evening Shema, to explain the differing Tannaitic opinions expressed in the Mishnah itself, and to address parallel Tannaitic material (2a – *gimmel* to 3a – *bet*). Such passages conform to the popular notion that the Gemara is essentially a commentary on the Mishnah⁴ that proceeds more or less step by step to clarify and expand the Mishnah’s legal precepts.

⁴ Robinson, G. *Essential Judaism*, Pocket Books, New York, 2000. P.336

The second group consists of passages of Gemara that principally focus not specifically on those issues addressed in the corresponding Mishnah but on prayer or praying in general. Thus, for example, 10b – *dalet* describes some aspects of prayer choreography. It continues the broad theme of the Mishnah, i.e. prayer, but unlike the first group it does not address the Mishnah's specific topic, i.e. the shema and its blessings.

The third group is made up of passages that wrestle with the topic of theodicy, by which I mean the "attempt to defend [or explain] divine justice in the face of aberrant phenomena that appear to indicate the deity's indifference or hostility toward virtuous people"⁵. In some cases, the focus is theodicy in the context of individual lives, asking why do righteous individuals suffer? In other cases it is collective or national theodicy – why is Israel still in exile? We shall see that, although our Mishnah does not touch on the topic of theodicy, the Gemara certainly does.

The final group consists of those passages that address a miscellaneous range of topics not principally related to the Mishnah's subject matter, prayer in general or theodicy. Such topics include a passage on the prophetic significance of names (7b – *bet*); a passage extolling the virtue of serving one who studies Torah over studying Torah itself; and a passage that describe factors that endear a national group to a sage (8b – *bet*).

It is not surprising that our Gemara directly addresses issues raised by the Mishnah or broadly related to its general subject matter of the Mishnah (i.e. groups one and two). However the two other groups represent material that has no obvious, direct or explicit connection with the Mishnah. The scattered comments in the outline section of this paper indicate how particular passages are linked with those that precede and succeed them, and there is usually an identifiable link of some kind as indicated above to explain how a new topic or theme has arisen. But how much of the Gemara's attention is focused on clearly relevant material with respect to the Mishnah

⁵ Crenshaw, J, "Theodicy", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 6, Doubleday, NY, 1992, p444

(groups one and two) and how much is “off topic” (groups three and four)? To try to answer these questions a table is presented below in which each passage of *b. Berakhot* chapter one is categorized in one of the four thematic groups. Where appropriate, passages that evenly straddle two themes are indicated by a star. In most cases reference to the outline section above will provide the reader ample explanation for why any given passage has been classified into one of the four groups.

What is revealed by the table? I contend that at least one broad and perhaps surprising conclusion can be drawn: a significant amount of attention is given by the authorship of the Gemara to the issue of theodicy in chapter one of *b. Berakhot*. In fact, the data is suggestive (although given the limitations of the analysis it cannot be conclusive) that more attention is given to theodicy than any of the other topic groups. There are 36 passages addressing theodicy while only 28 address the Mishnah directly. Passages vary in length and a more accurate comparison would be lines of texts or numbers of words but, precision notwithstanding, it is quite clear that the Gemara seems very interested in theodicy.

Table Categorizing Passages by Theme

Directly Addresses Mishnah	Prayer – Related	Theodicy	Miscellaneous
2a – <i>bet, gimmel, dalet</i>			
2b – <i>aleph, bet</i>			
3a – <i>aleph, bet*</i>		<i>bet*, gimmel, dalet</i>	
3b – <i>aleph,</i>			<i>bet, gimmel, dalet</i>
4a – <i>gimmel</i>		<i>bet</i>	<i>aleph,</i>
4b –	<i>aleph, bet*, dalet</i>	<i>bet*, gimmel</i>	
5a –	<i>aleph*, gimmel*, dalet*</i>	<i>aleph*, dalet*, hey, vav, zayin</i>	<i>bet</i>
5b –	<i>gimmel*, dalet*</i>	<i>aleph, bet, gimmel*, dalet*</i>	
6a –	<i>bet,</i>	<i>aleph, gimmel</i>	
6b – <i>zayin</i>	<i>aleph, bet, gimmel, hey*, vav</i>	<i>hey*, chet</i>	<i>dalet, tet, yud</i>
7a –	<i>aleph*</i>	<i>aleph*, bet, gimmel, dalet, vav</i>	
7b –	<i>hey*, zayin*</i>	<i>dalet, hey*, zayin*</i>	<i>aleph, bet, gimmel, vav</i>
8a –	<i>aleph*, bet</i>	<i>aleph*, gimmel</i>	<i>dalet, hey</i>
8b – <i>gimmel</i>			<i>aleph, bet</i>
9a – <i>aleph, bet, gimmel</i>			<i>dalet</i>
9b –		<i>bet</i>	<i>aleph</i>
Total 1:1 – 14	19	31	18
9b – <i>dalet</i>	<i>hey, vav,</i>		<i>zayin</i>
10a –	<i>hey</i>	<i>aleph</i>	<i>bet, gimmel, dalet</i>
10b – <i>hey</i>	<i>dalet</i>	<i>bet</i>	<i>aleph, gimmel</i>
11a – <i>aleph, bet, gimmel</i>			
11a – <i>hey*</i>		<i>hey*</i>	
11b – <i>aleph, bet, gimmel</i>			
12a – <i>bet</i>	<i>aleph, gimmel</i>		
12b – <i>aleph, dalet</i>	<i>bet</i>		<i>gimmel</i>
12b – <i>Gemara*</i>		<i>Gemara*</i>	
13a – <i>aleph*</i>		<i>aleph*</i>	
Total passages: 28	26	36	25

Two main questions arise from this conclusion. Firstly, what theodicy (or theodicies) are presented in this Gemara? Secondly, why is the authorship of the Gemara so interested in theodicy when addressing a Mishnah that discusses details of the evening and morning Shema and their related blessings?

The brief topic description given above to the group entitled "theodicy" does not do justice to the wide range of perspectives evident in this text. What follows is an attempt to categorize and illustrate the many ways this text accounts for evil in the world and why so often the righteous suffer while evildoers prosper.

1. God is like a parent who laments the punishments that had to be meted out to the beloved but misbehaving children:
 - 3a – *bet* – The destruction of the Temple and the Jews' exile is explained by portraying God as a parent who thrice-nightly laments at having been forced to discipline his/her children for their misconduct.
 - 3a – *gimmel* – Again God is presented as a parent lamenting the punishment that needed to be meted out against his/her beloved. Prayer is seen to assuage the divine lamentation.
2. Forces other than God account for some of the evil that occurs in the world:
 - 3a – *dalet* – Demons that lurk in the ruins of Jerusalem are cause for fear.
 - 4b – *gimmel* – At least some of God's actions are mediated through angels. The Angel of Death is the slowest to give ample time for the victim to repent.
 - 5a – *gimmel* – Demons are kept at bay by the bed time recitation of Shema. Some evil comes from demons rather than God.
 - 6a – *aleph* – Demons account for a number of evil phenomena. God is not responsible for it all.
3. A reaffirmation that God is the only source of afflictions and evil:
 - 5a – *dalet* – God is a direct source of afflictions.
 - 6b – *hey* – Despite the presence of other forces such as angels and demons, dualism is rejected. The congregation's orientation while praying in synagogue must not even hint at dualism.
 - 11a – *hey* – Isaiah 45:7 God "makes peace and creates evil". God is the source of both good and evil in the world even though the *yotzer* blessing was adjusted to soften this reality.

4. God responds to tragedy by supporting the fallen. God is the source of goodness in the face of evil:
4b – *bet* – The *Ashrei* teaches us that God responds to Israel's downfall by supporting them through it.
5. Parallel internal battles between good and evil urges rage within humans and God, accounting for human and divine evil actions:
5a – *aleph* – Evil conduct of humans is explained as resulting from the evil inclination overcoming a person's good inclination.
7a – *aleph* – Evil occurs when God's anger or strict justice overpowers God's mercy.
7a – *bet, gimmel* – God's anger is only momentary but in that moment of anger it may be possible for humans to harness God's wrath and direct it at others.
6. "Afflictions of Love"
5a – *hey, vav, zayin*, 5b – *aleph* – *Yissurin shel ahava* – Afflictions of love do not arise as punishment for sins but rather as a demonstration of divine love. The unjustified experience of afflictions in this life assures perfection in the next world by giving the pious the opportunity to accrue extra divine merits through suffering. On a national level, afflictions cause the people to merit rewards such as Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come.
7. One's actions are not the only determinants of reward and punishments – the sins of parents can be visited on their children:
7a – *dalet* – The suffering of righteous and the reward of evil-doers is due to the actions of their respective parents rather than their own deeds.
8. One's actions alone determine reward and punishment:
4a – *bet* – A person (David or Jacob) or a people (Israel) may be deserving of divine reward due to good conduct but the subsequent commission of sin can intervene and cause divine punishment to be unleashed.

5b – *bet* – A reassertion of the more straightforward notion of divine punishment arising in response to sins (even if the sins occurred unknowingly or if they were small “technical violations”).

7a – *hey* – The behavior of parents affects the merits of the children only to the extent that children continue their parents’ behavior. An individual is rewarded or punished for his/her own actions. The notion of complete and incomplete righteousness is outlined to explain why some righteous suffer (they are incompletely righteous).

10a *aleph* – God seeks the end of sin not the destruction of sinners.

9. Whether one’s own actions or the actions of others determine one’s reward or punishment depends on demonstrating humility:

10b – *bet* – One’s merits may be dependent on one’s own conduct or the conduct of others but one ought to be humble about one’s own merits.

10. Certain specific deeds accrue special merit and reward:

5b – *gimmel, dalet* – Certain specific practices, such as the recitation of the Shema at bedtime, or waiting for one’s fellow to finish his prayers before leaving can protect one from harm.

6b – *chet* – Making a groom happy on his wedding day causes rewards to accrue and is as effective as sacrifice in the once functioning Temple.

7b- *hey, zayin*, 8a – *aleph* – Prayer, good deeds and Torah study protect from enemies and will redeem God and God’s people from exile. Humans have it within their power to effect redemption - both individual and collective.

11. God’s powers may be limited:

8a *gimmel* – Since the destruction of the Temple God is limited to dwelling within the four cubits of *Halakhab*. This may imply a limitation of God’s omnipotence.

12. Heavenly justice should be left to God:

7b- *dalet* – Humans ought to avoid attempting to take heavenly law into their own hands unless very strict criteria are met. The divine will punish evil-doers as is appropriate. That evil-doers sometimes prosper is taken for granted.

13. In the face of suffering God's ongoing love for Israel and God's promise to redeem Israel from her current exile is assured:

6a – *gimmel* – God's ongoing love and devotion to the people of Israel is manifest by God's wearing tefillin. Whatever exile befalls Israel in the present, God still loves Israel and will ultimately redeem her.

7a – *vav* – Divine promises for good outcomes will always, eventually, be fulfilled. The implication is that Israel will be redeemed from her suffering in exile.

9b – *bet* – God redeemed past exiles, God will redeem this present exile too.

12b – *Gemara*, 13a – *aleph* – The redemption from Israel's current exile will be so great that it will dwarf the exile from Egypt. God can be trusted to bring this redemption about just as the divine redeemed Israel's ancestors.

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to go into an in-depth analysis of these varied rabbinic theologies of evil. Readily apparent though is that there are many responses and no single theodicy predominates. Some are quite standard, following the deuteronomistic theology of straightforward divine reward and punishment. Some are relatively innovative, such as the "afflictions of love". Others are verging on the heretical, such as the possible introduction of other agents (such as angels and demons) acting to produce some evil in the world, or the hint at limited divine power. These different theodicies sometimes address individual circumstances and others address corporate Israel, particularly Israel in exile. It is interesting to speculate whether the stammatitic hand was at work in placing assertions of God's faithfulness and promises of redemption at the end of the chapter to function as a kind of *nehemta*. What is clear is that not only were the rabbis and authors of the Gemara interested in the question of theodicy but they were able and willing to air many points of view on it.

Having considered the range of viewpoints presented in the text, the remaining question we will now consider is: why is the authorship of the Gemara so interested in theodicy when its Mishnah discusses the timing of the evening and morning Shema and their related blessings?

One possible explanation for so much interest in theodicy is reflected in the traditional understanding of *Seder Zeraim* (Seeds, of which *Berakhot* is the first tractate) as *Seder Emunah* – the Order of Faith (*b. Shabbat* 31a). Rashi (ad loc.) teaches that the connection between the mostly agricultural themes of this order and the concept of faith is through the need to trust individual farmers to fulfill their responsibilities to provide the required tithes. The Tosafot, on the other hand, understand it as relating to the faith that farmers must have in God to provide the required conditions for successful crop growth from season to season⁶. It makes a great deal of sense to begin an order about agriculture and faith in a God who will ensure abundance with an exposition on divine reward and punishment. A farmer's livelihood is dependent on the smooth and dependable functioning of the divine natural realm. Consideration of the many ways this divine realm can be understood, and hopefully assuaged, goes back to the most ancient human impulse to control the environment in part by pleasing the gods – of rain, of thunder and sun. In the case of rabbinic Judaism only one God needs to be pleased, yet sometimes people need to understand God's justice to maintain faith in the face of life's hardships.

Another way to account for such interest in theodicy is suggested by Steinsaltz in his introduction to the first chapter of *b. Berakhot*:

Beyond the technical questions of Halakhah deeper and more introspective questions are hinted at. Day and night are not just simply times. They take on deeper more substantive [meanings] as through them more introspective, more significant concepts are expressed. Day and night symbolize the high and low periods in the

⁶ Goldwurm, H. (Ed.), *Tractate Shabbos*, vol 1, Mesorah Publications, 2nd Ed. 1999, 31a, fn 29.

life of the nation and in the life of individuals. The halakhic questions are turned into theoretical-speculative questions of a spiritual nature.⁷

The Mishnah deals with questions of evening and morning recitation of the Shema, discerning when night begins and ends and when the morning begins. For Steinsaltz the darkness of night and the brightness of day represent the dialectic experienced by the Jewish people through the ages – great suffering, exile and subjugation on the one hand and wondrous deliverance and redemption on the other. Discussion relating to the theology of suffering and reward naturally flows from the symbolic meaning hinted at by the more technical halakhic discussion that the Mishnah focuses on.

A third way to understand the significant attention given to theodicy in our text is that it represents a record of the rabbis working through a stage in national grieving for the destruction of the second Temple. Perkins contends that progressing from Mishnah *Berakhot* 1:1, to the corresponding *Tosefta*, *Yerushalmi* and finally the *Bavli*, one can discern “the evolution of the approach of the rabbis to the catastrophic loss of the Temple through the stages of denial, displacement, acceptance, and consolation.”⁸ Understanding the various ways God reacts to the continued exile of God’s people as seen in our *Bavli* text mirrors the rabbis’ own experiences of grief and need for consolation. “[God] weeps for the Jews and their loss, and offers various forms of consolation. For one, by linking the destruction of the Temple to the sins of the people, there is, at the very least, an explanation for the otherwise unfathomable loss...”⁹ An interest in theodicy reflects the rabbis’ grief process.

Finally, a fourth, synthetic possibility exists. At the heart of the Shema is Deut. 11:13-21 that recounts the classic deuteronomistic theology of divine reward and punishment in the specific

⁷ Steinsaltz, A, *Talmud Bavli Masechet Brachot, Hamechon haisraeli l’parsumim talmudiim*, Jerusalem, 1993, p9 (My translation)

⁸ Perkins, C, “The Evening Shema: A Study in Rabbinic Consolation”, *Judaism* 43,1 (1994) p 27

⁹ *ibid.* p 34

context of agricultural success or failure. *Seder Zeraim* lends itself naturally to the inclusion of laws pertaining to the recitation of a text that reminds farmers that their crops depend on the people's adherence to the covenant with God. However, the theology expressed in this passage from Deuteronomy requires a significant leap of faith. Even in biblical times there was a recognition that this theology does not appear to function in a consistent and predictable manner at least from the human vantage point (see for example Eccl. Ch 9 and the Book of Job). From the rabbis' perspective the ongoing exile of the Jewish people raises questions about whether God still cares for Israel, and how Israel might do its part to bring about the long-awaited redemption.

But there is one more piece that ought to be added to the blend. The Babylonian Amoraim and the Stammaim lived and studied in Sassanian Persia¹⁰ where the official religion was Zoroastrianism. According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary:

[Zoroaster] apprehended Ahura Mazda as God, the one eternal uncreated Being, wholly good, wise and beneficent; but coexisting with him he saw another Being, the Evil Spirit, Angra Mainyu...who was wholly evil, ignorant, and malign, likewise uncreated, but doomed in the end to perish. Ahura Mazda, Zoroaster held, has created this sevenfold world as a battleground where evil can be encountered and overcome. To help in this great struggle he sends forth lesser divinities...who are at once hypostases of the powers of God and independent divinities, yet also forces which can enter into the just man...¹¹

The Achilles heel of monotheism is theodicy. How can one benevolent, omnipotent and omnipresent Deity allow evil to occur? The attraction of dualist and polytheist theologies is their ready explanation of suffering and evil as described above. I contend that the authors and redactors of the Gemara knew about Zoroastrian theology from their Sassanian milieu and that they were, if not threatened by it, at least motivated to provide a counter to it, especially in the face of late antique Judaism's continuing relative subjugation. Where else ought this question arise other than in the halakhic discussion of the "Watchword of our Faith" when Jews declare God to be one, indivisible Being?

¹⁰ Rubenstein, J, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, John Hopkins, Baltimore, 2003, p. 9

¹¹ Boyce, M, "Zoroaster, Zoroastrianism", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 6, Doubleday, NY 1992, p1170

As we have seen, the first chapter of *b. Berakhot* considers many issues. Prayer in general and the Shema in particular receive much attention. But what is interesting (and perhaps surprising) is the extent to which theodicy is given voice. We may not be able to establish a definitive reason for this but it seems clear that our ancient sages wrestled with squaring a single, loving, all powerful God with the many puzzling and disturbing realities of life. Perhaps, in our own time, we can listen to their discussions and continue their legacy by striving to better understand our world and our One God.