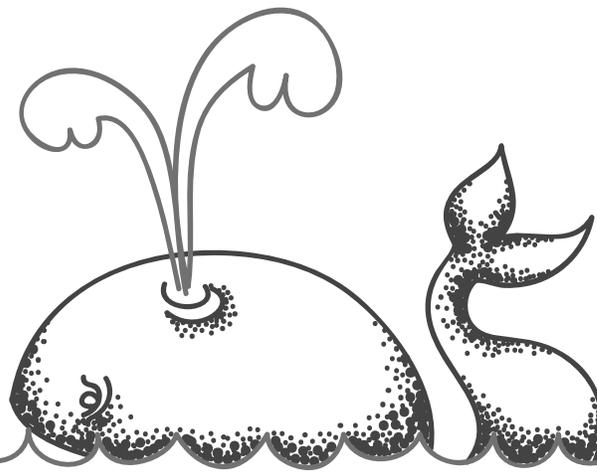


# CURIOUS TALES OF THE TALMUD

*Finding Personal Meaning in the  
Legends of Our Sages*



*A new six-week course  
from the Rohr Jewish  
Learning Institute*



## COURSE RATIONALE & SYLLABUS

**T**he Talmud's role as the primary source of Jewish law can obscure its value as a literary treasure. The stories in the Talmud reveal an imaginative richness and a striking sense of an ongoing task of narration as a crucial part of the interpretation and preservation of a treasured culture.

*A seafaring rabbi docks his boat on an island, only to realize that the apparent terra firma was really the back of a mammoth sea creature. . . . A king and queen argue whether sheep are superior to goats or vice versa; a high priest settles the debate. . . . G-d prays and asks a high priest to bless Him. . . . A rabbi debates the sages of Athens and explains to them how to sew together the parts of a broken millstone and how the spirit of an unhatched chick escapes the eggshell. . . . A nocturnal vision causes a Talmudic sage to have a newfound respect for an idolatrous monarch. . . .*

One of the most intriguing and perplexing aspects of the Talmud is that, despite its tremendous size and the remarkably broad range of topics it covers, it contains virtually no discussion about sociological, psychological, philosophical, or even theological issues. The sheer genius of the Talmudic scholars, as evidenced by their hair-splitting halachic debates and their finely honed methodologies, creates a natural expectation for profound insight and depth in the existential areas of life. And yet ...utter silence.

On the other hand, the Talmud contains many seemingly arcane and implausible stories and tales. It

is disquieting that these same brilliant and lucid rabbis, who expound on legal issues with such profound and grounded logic, become tellers of stories that can only be described as outlandish. Indeed, throughout the ages, scoffers and antisemites have used these stories in an attempt to prove the Talmud's silliness and, hence, its irrelevance and disposability.

The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute is offering an all-new, six-week course devoted to decoding Talmudic tales. The course, titled *Curious Tales of the Talmud*, draws upon the wisdom contained in hundreds of volumes of post-Talmudic literature. It is predicated on the understanding that the Talmud employed cryptic stories and parables to relay relevant and profound messages in a way that makes the reader an active partner in decoding the text and constructing its meaning. Written in esoteric language, these stories couch within them penetrating insights into life, our universe, G-d, humankind—and how they all come together.

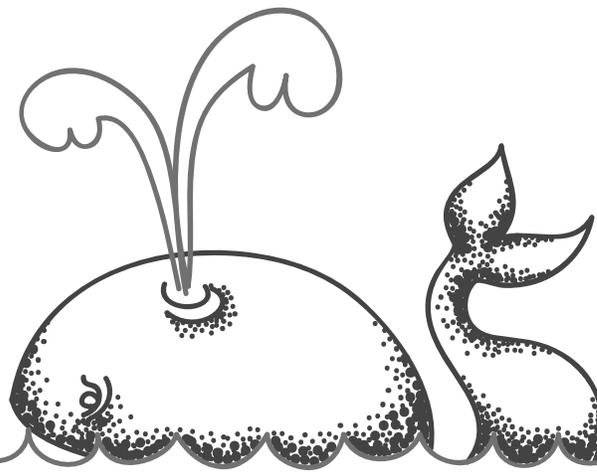
*Curious Tales of the Talmud* is a fascinating and fun course. Each of its six lessons addresses a fresh passage of the Talmud, one that promises to be a real head-scratcher. The lessons will each provide a method of decoding, showing students how to uncover unique and important takeaway messages that are relevant to the experiences of modern people.

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## Lesson One

# A NOMADIC RABBI'S WONDROUS TALES

*Life Lessons from Gargantuan Fish, Geese, and Corpses*

**R**abah bar bar Chanah's primary contribution to Talmudic literature is several well-known folios in Tractate Bava Batra. Therein, he recounts extraordinary episodes and sightings that were repeated to him by voyagers, or which he himself, allegedly, encountered firsthand on his ocean and desert expeditions. Rabah relates that he docked his boat on an island, only to realize that the apparent terra firma was really the back of a mammoth sea creature; he discusses oceanic waves that rise miles above sea level; and he speaks of an encounter with the gargantuan corpses of the "Dead of the Wilderness."

Rabah mastered the art of relaying challenging messages through the medium of the parable. This lesson will decode some of Rabah's tales and bring to light meaningful insights encoded within them, including tips on how to cope with life's challenges and struggles, a beautiful explanation of the secret of Jewish survival, and an exposition on the importance of action-based ritual. Atop all of these is the lesson taught by his method itself—that is, of the competence of imaginative narrative to create a personal awareness of the need to participate actively in the process of literature.

## Lesson Two

# WHEN G-D PRAYED

*A Study in the Art of Anthropomorphism*

**T**o whom does G-d pray and for what does He pray? The Talmud addresses both these questions, and then describes a mysterious episode in which G-d requested a blessing from Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest. If the notion of an omnipotent G-d praying isn't strange enough, the Talmud discusses an incident in which G-d "sinned," and then instructed us to bring a sin offering to atone for His behavior!

Over the ages, our sages were called upon time and again to defend the Talmud against its detractors. More often than not, those who wished to condemn

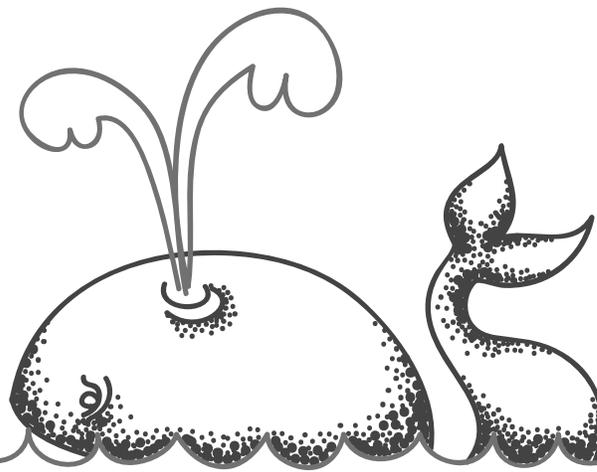
the Talmud pounced upon Talmudic statements and tales about G-d that seem to be inane at best, and often seem to have sacrilegious undertones. This lesson will examine some of these Talmudic passages and uncover (1) the profound theological messages encoded in these anthropomorphic sayings, and (2) how these messages can inform our own relationship with G-d, giving it character and essence. The use of paradoxical counter-narratives expands the significance of theology, taking it from the realm of the abstract and formulaic and showing the gripping reality of its subject in the simple terms of a story.

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## Lesson Three

# THE VINDICATION OF AN IDOLATROUS KING

*Seeing the Divine within Everything*

In the course of giving a lecture one day in his academy, Rabbi Ashi, the primary redactor of the Talmud, made a somewhat disparaging statement about Manasseh, an infamously idolatrous king of Judaea who had died centuries earlier. That night, Rabbi Ashi was visited by Manasseh in his dream. The notorious king reproached Rabbi Ashi for his disrespect and demonstrated his spiritual superiority over the venerable sage.

In addition to the obvious lesson that one ought never to judge a fellow human being too dismissively, this tale sheds light on the purpose of our nation's exile: finding G-d within every element of creation, including those that seem antithetical to G-d and to divine values. This message is further accentuated by the stories of (1) a vinegar-fueled lamp that burned a full night and day, and (2) nursing toddlers who abandoned their mothers' milk in favor of singing an ode to G-d.

## Lesson Four

# WHITE EGGS AND BLACK GOATS

*A Camouflaged Theological Debate*

At the behest of the Roman Caesar, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah traveled to Athens to engage the revered Athenian council of sages in an extreme battle of wits. In Athens, Rabbi Yehoshua is asked how to harvest a field of knives, how to tell whether an egg was hatched by a white hen or a black one, and how to mend a broken millstone. He was even asked to build a house in the sky! Rabbi Yehoshua nonchalantly responded to all these questions—and to several others of a similar ilk—to the Athenians' satisfaction.

Cloaked in their seemingly bizarre questions were profound intellectual challenges to many of the fundamentals of Jewish belief. Rabbi Yehoshua thus faced a threefold challenge: He first needed to decode the true meaning of the Athenians' questions; then he needed to formulate a response; and finally, he had to articulate the response to the questions in kind, in riddle form. The importance of the literary method was crucial, and in that lies a lesson in interpretation that was meant to be passed along to all future readers.

The rabbis probed beneath the surface of this odd debate and uncovered a fascinating theological dia-

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## Lesson Five

# THE GREAT OVEN DEBACLE

*When the Rabbis Overruled a Heavenly Decision*

Utter pandemonium reigned in the academy. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, widely recognized as the greatest sage of his generation, disagreed with his colleagues regarding the *achna'i* oven's susceptibility to ritual impurity. When his logical proofs failed to persuade his opponents, Rabbi Eliezer called upon a carob tree to leap from its place, cajoled a stream of water to reverse direction, and even instructed the walls of the study hall to intervene on his behalf—all to no avail. Finally, a heavenly voice reverberated in the room: "Defer to the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer!"

Why the unusual fuss over an oven? How can a carob tree, stream of water, or brick walls settle a halachic dispute? And most importantly, how were the rabbis empowered to disregard a directive from heaven? This lesson will also shed light on the process of establishing binding halachic rulings and enlighten readers about how a subversive narrative can power a more robust understanding of the core story.

## Lesson Six

# A TICKET TO PARADISE

*The Security of Stagnation and the Challenge of Change*

The great Rabbi Chananyah ben Teradyon lived in Israel under Roman occupation during one of the most oppressive eras in Jewish history. With utter disregard for the mortal risk involved, he publicly taught Torah to throngs of students. Ultimately, the Romans arrested him and burned him at the stake. The Talmud tells us, however, that Rabbi Chananyah expressed uncertainty about whether or not he was deserving of a portion in the World to Come, but only until he recalled an incident in which he donated a modest sum of money to charity.

This story—as well as a parable about the seemingly illogical rates at “rent-a-donkey locations” and a tale about a dispute between a king and queen about sheep and goats—teaches us about the danger of stagnation and the imperative to always challenge ourselves to continue growing in all important areas of life.