
BEYOND DISPUTE

DEBATES THAT SHAPE JEWISH LIFE

UNIT 5

WHO WIELDS AUTHORITY IN JEWISH RITUAL? SMASHING WINE BARRELS AND THE PATRIARCHY

Dr. Marjorie Lehman

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A note about the sources: this unit presents one long Talmudic passage, broken up into several sections.

The Talmud is the central body of rabbinic law, dialectic, and lore, comprising the Mishnah and the Gemara—the latter being an exposition and elaboration of the former in Hebrew and Aramaic. Two separate Talmudic compilations exist: the Babylonian Talmud (c. 500 CE) and the Jerusalem Talmud (also known as the Talmud of the Land of Israel, c. 400 CE).

I. WHAT IS THE *KOS SHEL BERAKHAH* (“CUP OF BLESSING”)?

1. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51a: Introduction to the “Cup of Blessing”

Rabbi Yohanan said: Anyone who blesses over a full cup [with the grace after meals] is given boundless inheritance, as it is said [in the blessing that Moses bestowed upon the Israelites before his death]: “And full of the Lord’s blessing, take possession on the west and south” (Deut. 33:23) [indicating that one whose cup is full of wine will receive God’s blessing—that is, they will inherit from all sides of the Land of Israel].

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: כָּל הַמְבָרֵךְ
עַל כּוֹס מְלֵא, נוֹתֵן לוֹ
נְחֵלָה בְּלִי מְצָרִים,
שְׁנַאֲמַר: “וּמְלֵא בְרַכַּת ה’,
יָם וְדָרוֹם יְרֵשָׁה” (דְּבָרִים
לֵג, כג).

Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina says: He merits and inherits two worlds, this world and the World to Come.

ר’ יוֹסֵי בַר חַנִּינָא אוֹמֵר:
זוֹכֶה וְנוֹחֵל שְׁנֵי עוֹלָמִים,
הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

2. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51a–b: Rituals surrounding the “Cup of Blessing”

Rabbi Zeira said in the name of Rabbi Abahu, and some say this was taught in a baraita: ¹ Ten things were said regarding the cup of blessing: ² It requires washing and rinsing; it must be undiluted wine; the cup must be full; it requires crowning and covering. One takes [the cup] with both hands and then places it in his right hand; he raises it a *tefah*³ above the ground and he concentrates his eyes on it. And some say: he also sends it as a gift to his household.

אָמַר רַבִּי זֵירָא אֲמַר רַבִּי אַבְהוּ, וְאֲמַרִי
לָהּ בְּמִתְנִיתָא.
תְּנָא: עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נֶאֱמָרוּ בְּכוֹס שֶׁל
בְּרַכָּה: טְעוֹן הַדְּחָה וְשִׁטְיָפָה, חֵי וּמְלֵא,
עִיטוֹר וְעִיטוֹף, נוֹטְלוֹ בְּשֵׁתֵי יָדָיו וְנוֹתְנוֹ
בְּיָמִין, וּמְגַבִּיהוּ מִן הַקְּרָקַע טַפַּח, וְנוֹתֵן
עֵינָיו בּוֹ. וַיֵּשׁ אוֹמְרִים: אֵף מְשַׁגְּרוּ
בְּמִתְנָה לְאַנְשֵׁי בֵּיתוֹ.

¹ A baraita refers to teachings from the Mishnaic period that were not codified as part of the six orders of the Mishnah; the word literally means “outside,” as in “outside the canon.” Originally, “baraita” probably referred to teachings from schools outside the main Mishnaic-era academies, but in later collections, individual baraitot are often authored by sages of the Mishnah (the tannaim).

² According to Rashi, this refers to the cup used for Birkat Hamazon.

³ A *tefah* is a measurement of approximately a handbreadth.

II. THE DILEMMA IN PRACTICE: ALLOCATING RESOURCES

3. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51b: Ulla Dines at Rav Nahman's House

“And some say: he also sends it as a gift to his household”—so that his wife will be blessed. [The following incident, related to the above teaching, occurred:] Ulla visited the house of Rav Nahman. He ate bread and recited *birkat hamazon*. He [then] passed the cup of blessing to Rav Nahman. Rav Nahman said to him, “Let Master [Ulla] send the cup of blessing to [my wife] Yalta.”

”וּמְשַׁגְרוּ לְאִנְשֵׁי בֵּיתוֹ בְּמִתְנָה—
כִּי הֵיכִי דְתַתְּבַרְךְ דְּבֵיתָהּ. עוּלָא
אֶקְלַע לְבֵי רַב נַחְמָן. כְּרִיךְ רִיפְתָא,
כְּרִיךְ בְּרַכְתָּ מְזוֹנָא. יְהֵב לֵיהּ כֶּסֶא
דְּבְרַכְתָּא לְרַב נַחְמָן.
אָמַר לֵיהּ רַב נַחְמָן: לִישְׁדַּר מַר כֶּסֶא
דְּבְרַכְתָּא לְיַלְתָּא.

4. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51b: Ulla's Disagreement with Rav Nahman

Ulla said to Rav Nahman: [That is not necessary because] Rabbi Yohanan said: The fruit of a woman's belly is only blessed through the fruit of a man's belly [i.e., his seed], as it is written, “[God] will bless the fruit of your [male singular] belly” (Deut. 7:13). It does not say “the fruit of *her belly*” but rather the fruit of “*your [male] belly*.”

It was similarly taught in a baraita: Rabbi Natan said: From where [i.e., from what scriptural source do we learn] that the fruits of a woman's belly are only blessed through the fruits of the man's belly? From: “[God] will bless the fruit of your [male singular] belly.” It does not say “the fruit of *her belly*” but rather the fruit of “*your [male] belly*.”

אָמַר לֵיהּ: הֵכִי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן:
אֵין פְּרִי בְטָנָה שֶׁל אִשָּׁה מִתְבָּרַךְ אֶלָּא
מִפְּרִי בְטָנוֹ שֶׁל אִישׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ”וַיְבָרַךְ
פְּרִי בְטָנְךָ” (דְּבָרִים ז, יג) - פְּרִי בְטָנָה
לֹא נֶאֱמַר, אֶלָּא פְּרִי בְטָנְךָ.
תְּנִיָּא נְמִי הֵכִי:
רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אוֹמַר: מִנֵּין שְׂאִין פְּרִי בְטָנָה
שֶׁל אִשָּׁה מִתְבָּרַךְ אֶלָּא מִפְּרִי בְטָנוֹ שֶׁל
אִישׁ?
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ”וַיְבָרַךְ פְּרִי בְטָנְךָ” (דְּבָרִים ז,
יג) - פְּרִי בְטָנָה לֹא נֶאֱמַר, אֶלָּא פְּרִי
בְטָנְךָ.

5. Deuteronomy 7:13–14: The Proof-text in Its Biblical Context

¹³He will favor you and bless you and multiply you; He will bless the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land that He swore to your fathers to assign to you. ¹⁴You shall be blessed above all other peoples: there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock.

(יג) וְאֶהְבֶּךָ וַיְבָרְכֶךָ וַיְהַרְבֶּךָ וַיְבָרַךְ פְּרִי בְטָנְךָ וּפְרִי
אֲדָמָתְךָ דְגִנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וַיְצַהֲרֶךָ שֶׁגֶר אֶלְפִיךָ
וְעִשְׂתֹּרֶת צֹאנְךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָשָׁבַע
לְאַבְתָּיִךְ לָתֵת לָךְ.
(יד) בְּרוּךְ תִּהְיֶה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים לֹא יִהְיֶה בְךָ עֲקָר
וְעֲקָרָה וּבְבִהֶמְתֶּךָ.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51b: Yalta Breaks the Wine Barrels

Meanwhile [as Ulla said this], Yalta rose passionately, went to the wine storehouse, and broke 400 barrels of wine.

אֲדַהֲכִי שְׂמֵעָה יְלִתָּא, קָמָה בְּזִיְהָרָא
וְעִלְתָּה לְבֵי חֲמָרָא וְתַבְרָא אַרְבַּע
מָאָה דְנִי דְחֲמָרָא.

7. Babylonian Talmud 51b: Conclusion

Rav Nahman said to him, “Let Master [Ulla] send her another cup.” He [Ulla] sent it to her [with the message]: “All of this type [i.e., all the wine in the barrel from which the cup of blessing was poured] can be counted as the wine of blessing.” She sent him [in response]: “From itinerant [peddlers come idle] words and from old rags [come] lice⁴”.

אָמַר לִיה רַב נַחְמָן: נְשַׁדֵּר לָהּ
מִר כָּסָא אַחֲרִינָא.
שְׁלַח לָהּ: כָּל הָאֵי נִבְגָּא
דְּבִרְכָתָא הִיא.
שְׁלַחָה לִיה: מִמַּהְדוּרֵי מִילֵי
וּמִסְמָרְטוּטֵי כָלְמִי.

⁴ Some have suggested that Yalta is playing on a verse from Ben Sira (an early compilation of wisdom literature composed after the closing of the Biblical canon) 42:13, “From a garment comes moths and from a woman comes wickedness.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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