

# Jewish Humor Through the Sages

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## Introduction

- Not general presentation on Jewish humor: Just humor in Tanach, Talmud, Midrash, and other ancient Jewish sources.
- Far from exhaustive.
- Tanach mentions “laughter” 50 times (root: *tz-cho-q*) [excluding Yitzhaq]
- Talmud: Records teachings of more than 1,000 rabbis spanning 7 centuries (2<sup>nd</sup> BCE to 5<sup>th</sup> CE). Basis of all Jewish law.
  - Savoraim* improved style in 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.
- Rabbis dream up hypothetical situations that are strange, farfetched, improbable, or even impossible.
  - To illustrate legal issues, entertain to make study less boring, and sharpen the mind with brainteasers.

- Going to extremes helps to understand difficult concepts. (E.g., Einstein's "thought experiments".)
- Some commentators say humor is not intentional:
  - Maybe sometimes, but one cannot avoid the feeling it is.
  - Reason for humor not always clear.
- Rabbah (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) always began his lectures with a joke:
 

Before he began his lecture to the scholars, [Rabbah] used to say something funny, and the scholars were cheered. After that, he sat in awe and began the lecture. [Shabbat 30b]
- Laughing and entertaining are important. Talmud:
  - Rabbi Beroka Hoza'ah often went to the marketplace at Be Lapat, where [the prophet] Elijah often appeared to him.
  - Once he asked [Elijah]: Is there any one in this market who has a share in the World to Come?
  - [Elijah looked around and] answered: No...
  - Later, two men passed by and [Elijah] remarked: These two have a share in the World to Come.
  - Rabbi Beroka then approached [these two men] and asked them: What is your occupation?
  - They replied: We are jesters. When we see people who are depressed, we cheer them up. Furthermore, when we see two people quarrelling, we try hard [with humor] to make peace between them. [Ta'anit 22a]
- [During Sukkot] Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel used to take eight lighted torches, [juggle them,] catch one and throw one, and they did not touch one another. [Sukkah 53a]

Humor centered around irony, sarcasm, satire, exaggeration, wit, plays on words, desire for accuracy, funny phrasing, religious fervor some might term excessive, making up absurd situations to make a point, besting the Roman Emperor in debate, even besting God Himself!

## Warning

Talmud includes halacha (law) and Aggadah (homiletic folk stories, light stuff). "Talmud study" is the first only, not the second. The Midrash, commenting on this verse in Hosea:

Those who dwell in His shade will return. They will revive like grain and blossom like a vine. [Hosea 14:8]

notes:

“They will revive like grain” means through Talmud [study, i.e. halacha];  
“and blossom like a vine” means through Aggadah [study, i.e. homiletic  
teachings and stories of the Sages.] [Lev. R. 1:2]

The Netziv, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Poland, comments:

Grain is the staff of life and without it man cannot exist. Just as grain is the primary source of man's nourishment, so too the study of Talmud, with its instructions regarding the laws of living, is to be man's primary focus. Aggadah, on the other hand, is like wine. It can make man happy, but it must be imbibed in proportion. And it is destructive if it is man's sole source of nourishment. One who engages primarily in Aggadah risks misunderstanding and misrepresenting the teachings of our Sages, for his life and view of the world are not thoroughly rooted in the firm ground of Talmud. [Netziv, Haamek Davar, Harchev Davar on Deut. 32:4]

So light stuff isn't enough and can't be called studying Talmud!

## Humor in Tanach

-Whose fault?

Sarai can't conceive, so she tells her husband Avram:

[My lord], I beg you, go into my maid [Hagar]. Perhaps I can obtain children through her. And Avram listened to the voice of Sarai. [Genesis 16:2]

So Hagar gets pregnant and quickly becomes very impertinent and disrespectful towards her mistress Sarai. So a very angry Sarai goes to her husband Avram and tells him:

This is all your fault! [Genesis 16:5]

-Who is too old?

God tells Sarah she will have a child:

And Sarah laughed, saying: Shall I have pleasure when I am old?  
My husband is also old.

And the Lord said to Abraham [who did not hear Sarah]: “Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I bear a child, when I am old?” [Genesis 18:12-13]

God does not report exactly what Sarah said for *shalom bayit* -- to keep peace in the family. Based on this, Talmud concludes it's OK to tell white lies:

The School of Ishmael taught: Peace is a precious thing, for even the Holy One, blessed be He, changed what was said for its sake. [Bava Metzia 87a].

Note: After Sarah dies Abraham marries Keturah and has six more sons.

## -Middle-Eastern negotiations I: Abraham bargains with God

### God decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah:

And Abraham drew near, and said: Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city. Will you also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far from you to do so, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, far from you. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

And the Lord said: If I find in Sodom fifty righteous..., I will spare the whole place for their sakes.

And Abraham answered and said: Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Perhaps there shall lack five of the fifty righteous. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?

And [God] said, If I find forty five there, I will not destroy it.

And [Abraham] spoke to [God] yet again, and said: Perhaps forty shall be found there.

And [God] said, I will not do it for the sake of forty.

And he said to him: Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Perhaps thirty shall be found there.

And [God] said: I will not do it, if I find thirty there.

And [Abraham] said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord. Perhaps twenty shall be found there. And [God] said: I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty.

And [Abraham] said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak just one more time. Possibly ten shall be found there. And [God] said, I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.

And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had finished talking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. [Genesis 18:23-32]

## -Middle-Eastern negotiations II: Abraham bargains with Ephron

Sarah dies and Abraham looks for a place to bury her. He offers to buy a cave from a man named Ephron. Ephron says:

No, my lord, listen to me! I have already given the field to you, and as for the cave that is in it, I have given it to you [as well]. In the view of my countrymen, I have given it to you. Bury your dead!

Abraham insists on paying:

If only you would listen to me. I am giving you the money for the field...

Ephron says:

My lord, hear me! A piece of land worth 400 silver shekels, what is that between me and you? Bury your dead.

Abraham gets it and pays Ephron that outrageous price. [Genesis 23:11-16]

Welcome to the Middle East! (Still that way today.)

-Explain it to me more clearly!

Shechem rapes Dinah, Jacob's daughter, then sends his father to ask her father for her hand in marriage, thinking that by so doing:

...their livestock, their possessions, and all their animals will be ours! [Gen. 34:23].

Jacob agrees, provided all males in the tribe are circumcised. The deal is struck. Shechem then orders all the males circumcised. The Midrash says:

There was one particular individual, [Magbai,] who, [after being told] "Come and get circumcised", retorted: "[Let me get this straight:] SHECHEM is getting married and \*I\* must get circumcised!?" [Gen. R. 80:8]

-Wrong gifts?

There is a deep famine in the Land of Israel. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food, and tells them to bring gifts to the ruler of Egypt (who, unbeknownst to him, is his own son Joseph):

If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift -- a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. [Genesis 43:11]

Gifts of food when there is a famine? Why not precious metals or stones, or ornate weapons?

-One trouble at a time!

Torah:

And Moses said to God [at the burning bush]: "Behold, when I come to the people of Israel, and shall say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they shall say to me: What is his name, what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHAT I AM". And he said: "So shall you say to the people of Israel, "I AM" has sent me to you." [Ex. 3:13-14]

Talmud:

[Why was "I am What I am" shortened to just "I am"?] "I am What I am" means that the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "Go and say to Israel: I am with you in this servitude of yours, and I shall be with you in your servitudes [of the future, in] the kingdoms [of Babylon and Rome]." [Moses] said to Him: Lord of the Universe, they have enough trouble now. [No need to tell them about future troubles.] The Holy One, blessed be He, [agreed] and said to [Moses]: Go and tell them [just]: "I AM" has sent me to you. [Ber. 9b]

## -Sarcasm

The Israelites see Pharaoh's army closing in on them from behind, and before them is the sea. So they tell Moses:

Is it because there were no graves in Egypt, that you took us away to die in the wilderness? [Exodus 14:11]

## -One more miracle?

Moses is away to get the Torah. The people get scared and ask Aaron to make them a Golden Calf to worship. Aaron obliges. An angry Moses comes back and confronts Aaron. Aaron replies:

They gave me their gold, and I just threw it in the fire and out came this calf! [Exodus 32:21-24]

## -Moses' masterful plea

Moses pleads before God on behalf of Israel, after they revert to idolatry by building and worshiping the Golden Calf, using a remarkable series of ten arguments to influence the Almighty: [Exodus 32:9-35]

- Don't destroy Your possession, Israel. If You destroy them, it's Your loss.

- Don't abandon Your plan. You worked hard to get them out of Egypt to fulfill Your plan, and You are letting it all go to waste? Don't You want Your plan to come to fruition?

- Note that not ALL Israel worshiped the Golden Calf.

- Don't be angry just because Israel wanted to make your job easier. The Midrash explains:

When Israel committed that act, Moses arose to appease God and said: "Lord of the Universe! They have given You an assistant and You are annoyed with them? Why, this Calf which they have made will be Your assistant. You will cause the sun to rise while it will cause the moon to rise. You will look after the stars and it will see to the constellations. You will cause the dew to descend and it will cause the winds to blow. You will make the rains come down, while it will be responsible for the growth of plants."

God said to him: "Moses! You err as they do! For there is nothing real in it."

Moses replied: "If so, Why are You angry with Your people?"

[Midrash, Exodus Rabbah 43:6]

- I absolve You of Your vow. The Midrash explains:

Moses absolved his Creator of His vow. When Israel made the Calf, Moses began to persuade God to forgive them. But God said: "Moses, I have already taken an oath that 'He who sacrifices to the gods... shall be destroyed' [see Exodus 22:19], and I cannot retract an oath which has proceeded from My mouth."

Moses said: "Master of the Universe! Did You not grant me the power to annul oaths? [see Numbers 30:3]? If a jurist wants others to respect the law, he must be the first to observe it. Since You have commanded me concerning the annulment of vows, it is only right and proper that You should follow this procedure Yourself." Whereupon Moses wrapped himself in his tallit and seated himself in the posture of a rabbinical judge, and God stood before him as one asking for the annulment of his vow. What did Moses say to Him? A most difficult thing. Rabbi Yochanan said: The difficult thing he said was: "Do You now regret Your vow?"

God replied: "I regret now the evil which I said I would do unto My people."

When Moses heard this, he proclaimed: "Be it absolved for You, be it absolved for You. There is neither vow nor oath any longer..."

[Midrash, Exodus Rabbah 43:4]

-Worry about Your image. What will the Egyptians say? Do You really want them to laugh at You when Your plan comes to nothing? This would diminish Your stature.

-Keep Your promises. You promised the Patriarchs they will have descendants and land. Does Your promise count for nothing?

-You Yourself caused Israel to sin. The Talmud explains:

They said in the school of Rabbi Yannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, the silver and gold that You showered on Israel ... was what led them to make the Calf.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse round his neck and set him down at the door of a brothel. How could the boy help sinning?

[Talmud, Berachot 32a]

-I am angry too. Here Moses is co-opting. The Midrash explains:

What did Moses do? He went up to God, and said: "This people has sinned a great sin!" When God saw this He said to him: "Moses, you, too, are angry with them? We cannot both be angry. When you see Me pour hot water, you pour cold, and when you see Me pour cold, you pour hot..." [Midrash Yalkut Shimoni]

-Don't take me for granted. If You don't forgive them, I quit. Pull my name out of the Torah. I don't want to be associated with failure.

In the end, it worked! God not only did not destroy Israel, but He restored them to chosen status!

-Too difficult for God?

God promises meat for a whole month:

And Moses said, "[There are] 600,000 [of us] and you said, I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month. Will it be enough if we slaughter all the flocks and the herds? Will it be enough if all the fish of the sea are offered to them?"

And the Lord said to Moses, "Has the Lord's hand become short? You shall see now whether my word shall come to pass to you or not." [Numbers 11: 21-23]

Translation: Moses says: God, this one may be too big even for You!  
God: Oh yeah? You just watch!

-You said it!

Korach rebels. Moses summons the rebel leaders for a little talk.

They reply:

*Lo naaleh* -- We will not go up. (Numbers 16:12).

They were right. Later the earth opened and they were swallowed, going straight down (Numbers Rabbah 18:10).

-Verbosity

The future King Saul asks some young maidens by a water well: "Is the prophet Samuel here?"

Here is what the girls answer, verbatim from the Bible:

He is. Behold, he is before you. Make haste now, for he came today to the city; for there is a sacrifice of the people today in the high place. As soon as you come to the city, you shall find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat; for the people will not eat until he comes, because he blesses the sacrifice; and afterwards those who are invited, eat. So therefore go up; for about this time you shall find him. [1Sam. 9:12-13]

The Talmud [Berachot 48b] asks:

Why did they make such a long story of it?

and it gives three answers:

-Because women are fond of talking.



-Because the girls wanted to feast their eyes on Saul's good looks. Indeed, the Bible tells us:

[There was not among the people of Israel a more handsome person than Saul,] from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. [1Sam. 9:2]

-Because Saul was not meant to be king until a certain moment, and God made the girls delay him until that moment.

The Talmud comments in this respect:

Ten measures of speech descended to the world. The women took nine [and the men took one.] [Kiddushin 49b]

-Enough lunatics!

David is brought before King Achish and pretends to be insane.

King Achish tells his servants:

Why did you bring him to me? Does it look like I don't have enough lunatics [in my kingdom] that you have brought this one to carry on in my presence? [1Sam. 21:15-16]

-Old King David and young Abishag

Tanach:

And King David was old and advanced in years. They covered him with blankets, but he could not become warm. So his servants said to him, "Let there be sought for [you] a young virgin, and let her stand before [you], and be [your] attendant, and let her lie in your bosom, that [you] may become warm." And they looked for a pretty girl throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag, a Shunemmite, and brought her to the king. And the girl was very pretty, and she attended the king, and ministered to him. But the king knew her not. [1Kings 1:1-4]

The Talmud adds:

Abishag said to [King David], "Let us marry."

But he said: "You are forbidden to me [since I already have the maximum number of eighteen wives.]"

She teased him: When courage fails the thief, he becomes virtuous. [I.e., you can't do it anymore!]

Then he said to [his servants:] Bring me [my wife] Bathsheba...

Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: On that occasion Bathsheba dried herself thirteen times. [Sanhedrin 22a]

David had intercourse with his wife thirteen times in a row to show Abishag he still could!

-Sarcasm towards idolaters

And Elijah said to the prophets of Baal... "Call on the name of your gods!"... And they ...called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us." But there was no sound, no response... And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked [the prophets of Baal], and said, "Shout louder; for he is a god! Maybe he is deep in thought, or maybe he is relieving himself in the bathroom, or maybe he is on a trip, or maybe he is sleeping, and you can wake him." [1Kings 18:25-27]

-Don't bless at the wrong time!

If you rise up very early in the morning and wake your friend with a wonderful blessing, your friend will consider it to be worse than receiving a curse. [Proverbs 27:14]

## **Humor in Talmud and Midrash**

### **Desire for accuracy**

-Proper attribution

The rabbis were very careful to assign credit for their pronouncements. The Talmud says twice:

He who reports a saying in the name of its author brings deliverance to the world. [Megillah 15a; Chullin 104b]

This leads to cases where attribution can take longer than the saying itself, to wit [8 levels]:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Zebid said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhaq ben Tabla, who said it in the name of Rabbi Hiyya Areka, who belonged to the school of Rabbi Aha, who said it in the name of Rabbi Zera, who said it in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, who said it in the name of Rabbi Hanania, who said it in the name of Rabbi Mi'asha, on the authority of Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'ai: \_\_\_\_ [Nedarim 8b]

-You are not a Sage!

Talmud frequently cites and credits minority opinions first, then concludes with the majority opinion, which is binding. That majority opinion is introduced with "But the Sages said..." [*v'chachamin omrim*], making it look like the minority rabbis are not Sages! [178 times in Talmud/Midrash]

-What difference does it make?

1

Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument [to convince his colleagues] but they did not accept them. He said he to them: If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it! Thereupon the carob-tree [uprooted itself and moved] 100 cubits out of its place; others say 400 cubits... [Bava Metzia 59b]

2

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] observed: "Suffering is precious". [He suffered] for thirteen years, six because of kidney stones and seven because of scurvy: others reverse them... [Bava Metzia 85a]

Rest of story deserves to be told to show that love and compassion are very much present in the Talmud:

[His sufferings] came to him through a certain incident, and departed likewise.

"They came to him through a certain incident." What is it? A calf was being taken to the slaughter. It broke away, hid his head under Rabbi's skirts and wailed [in terror]. "Go", said he, "you were created for this." Thereupon they said [in Heaven], "Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him."

"And departed likewise." How so? One day Rabbi's maid was sweeping the house. [Seeing] some young weasels lying there, she began to sweep them away. He said to her, "Leave them be. It is written, "and his mercies are over all his works."" [V'rachamav al kol maasav -- Ps. 145:9]. They said [in Heaven], "Since he is [now] compassionate, let us be compassionate to him." [Bava Metzia 85a]

-Is intent important?

Mishnah: If a knife fell down and slaughtered [a kosher animal], in the proper way, [the animal still may not be eaten]...

Gemara: If a person threw a knife against a wall, and in its flight it slaughtered a [kosher] animal in the proper way, [may the animal be eaten?]

Rabbi Nathan declares the slaughtering valid, but the Sages declare it invalid... The halachah, [however], agrees with Rabbi Nathan... [He also ruled that if a deaf-mute, a minor or a mentally-challenged person] slaughtered [an animal]... the slaughtering is valid...

Intention to slaughter [according to ritual] is not essential.  
[Chullin 31a]

-There is no end to the matter!

If you clean a room for Pessah by removing all *chametz* (leaven), then start cleaning another room, a weasel may bring leaven into the room you just cleaned. And if you clean the whole house, a weasel may bring leaven from the house across the street. And...

Mishnah: We have no fear that a weasel may have dragged [*chametz*] from one room to another or from one spot to another. For if we did, [we should also fear it may have dragged *chametz*] from courtyard to courtyard and from town to town. **אין לדבר סוף** – *En l'davar sof* -- There is no end to the matter. [Pesachim 8b]

The rabbis forcefully put an end to theoretical contingencies that can go on forever.

-Murderer or not?

1

Rabbah... said: If somebody is thrown from a roof and somebody else comes along and kills him with a sword [right before he dies from hitting the ground, who, if anyone, is guilty of murder?]

Rabbi Yehudah ben Bathyra [said: The one who killed with the sword. But the Sages said: No one.] [Baba Kamma 26b]

Note: All agree the one who threw the victim from the roof is not a murderer!

2

Rava said: If someone shot an arrow at someone who held a shield in his hand [that would have stopped the arrow], but a third person came along and took the shield away [at the last second and the victim died]... [who] is liable [for murder]? [No one.] [Sanhedrin 77b]

## Humor in the phrasing

-Don't overdo the splitting of hairs:

1

We learned: A young pigeon which is found on the ground within fifty cubits of a cote belongs to the owner of the cote; if found beyond fifty cubits from the cote, it belongs to the finder...

Rabbi Jeremiah raised the question: If one paw is within fifty cubits and the other beyond, how do we decide?

It was for asking this question that they kicked Rabbi Jeremiah out of the House of Study [Bet HaMidrash]. [Bava Batra 23b]

2

Pelemo asked Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]: If a man has two heads, on which one must he put the tefillin?

Rabbi replied: Which do you choose, to leave immediately, or be excommunicated [placed under cherem]?

In the meantime a man came [to the school] and said, "My first-born child was born with two heads. How much must I give the kohen, [the usual amount or twice that]?" [Menachot 37a]

### -The fulfilled vow

Man to wife, "I vow that I will not have sex with you until you show me something beautiful about you."

Man went to see Rabbi Yishmael son of Rabbi Jose to get out of vow.

The rabbi said:

-Perhaps her head is beautiful?

-It is round.

-Perhaps her hair is beautiful?

-It is like stalks of flax.

-Perhaps her eyes are beautiful?

-They are bleary.

-Perhaps her nose is beautiful?

-It is swollen.

-Perhaps her lips are beautiful?

-They are thick.

-Perhaps her neck is beautiful?

-It is squat.

-Perhaps her waist is beautiful?

-It protrudes.

-Perhaps her feet are beautiful?

-They are as broad as those of a duck.

-Perhaps her name is beautiful?

-Her name is "Muck".

-The rabbi said: In that case I pronounce your vow fulfilled. Her name suits her beautifully. [Nedarim 66b]

### The A-Fortiori argument

*Kal va-chomer (a fortiori)* is one of the 13 methods by which the Talmud infers the law from the Torah.

#### -No weddings permitted!

-Rabbi Yosei ben Taddai of Tiberias said: My daughter is forbidden to me, but her mother [my wife] is permitted to me.

-If the daughter of someone who is permitted to me is NOT permitted to me, then all the more reason why the daughter of someone who is NOT permitted to me should NOT be permitted to me.

- Now, most mothers are married and are forbidden to me.
- If they are forbidden to me, then so are their daughters.
- Therefore all marriages are forbidden.
- Rabban Gamliel excommunicated him [for discrediting rabbinical methods of argument]. [Derech Eretz Rabbah 1]

There are exceptions to all methods!

## Stories of the rabbis

### -The proper sukkah

[If one] erects his Sukkah on the deck of a ship, Rabbi Gamaliel declares it invalid [because it could easily be blown away] and Rabbi Akiva declares it valid. It happened that Rabbi Gamaliel and Rabbi Akiva were traveling on a ship [during Sukkot] and Rabbi Akiva arose and erected a Sukkah on the deck of the ship. The next day the wind blew and tore it away. So Rabbi Gamaliel said to [Rabbi Akiva], Akiva, where is your Sukkah? [Sukkah 23a]

### -Ambush?

Rabbi once suffered from a disorder of the bowels and said, Does anyone know whether apple-cider bought from a non-Jew is prohibited or permitted?

Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Jose replied, "My father once had the same complaint and they brought him apple-cider bought from a non-Jew which was seventy years old; he drank it and recovered."

[Rabbi] said to him, You had this information all along and you let me suffer! [Avodah Zara 40b]

(You never asked me before!)

### -Use as few words as possible with women

Rabbi Yosei the Galilean was once on a journey when he met Beruriah. He asked her, "[Excuse me], what road should we take in order to get to Lod?"

She replied, "You stupid Galilean! Did our Sages not teach: "Do not talk too much to women" [Avot 1:5] ? You should have asked: How to Lod? [Eruvin 53b]

### -Hefker!

Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Jose was walking on a road when he met a man carrying a load of sticks. The man put the sticks down, rested, and then said to [Rabbi Ishmael], "Load me up." [as required by Ex. 23:5]

Rabbi Ishmael [who was rich and overweight] asked: "How much are the sticks worth?"

The man answered: "Half a zuz".

Rabbi Ishmael paid him the half zuz and said "Hefker!" [meaning: I declare these sticks ownerless, so that anyone who takes them is not a thief].

The man said, "I claim ownership of these ownerless sticks. Now [to Rabbi Ishmael]: Load me up!"

Rabbi Ishmael gave him another half zuz and again declared the sticks ownerless.

Seeing that the man was again about to claim them again, he added, "I have declared the sticks ownerless except to you."

But [the Rabbis asked]: Can something be declared ownerless with a condition attached? No, but Rabbi Ishmael [had to stop the man and] did it with mere words. [Bava Metziah 30b]

### -Wrong reason

The Emperor proposed to Rabbi Tanhum, Come, let us all be one people.

The rabbi answered, Very well, but we are circumcised and cannot possibly become like you [because our circumcision cannot be undone].

So why don't YOU become circumcised like us?

The Emperor replied: You have spoken well. Nevertheless, anyone who gets the better of the king [in debate] must be thrown to the lions. So they threw [the rabbi] to the lions, but they did not eat him.

An unbeliever remarked [to the Emperor]: The reason they did not eat him is that they are not hungry.

[The Emperor said: Well, let's find out; and had the unbeliever] thrown to the lions, and the lions ate him. [Sanhedrin 39a]

### -Stay away from me!

Raba said: It is a man's duty to drink on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai.

Rabbah and Rabbi Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They got drunk and Rabbah arose and cut Rabbi Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. [Rabbah] said, "Next year come again and we'll celebrate together again."

[Rabbi Zera] replied: "[No, thanks.] A miracle may not happen every time." [Megillah 7b]

### -If it's me, it's different!

Rav Yehudah said it was permissible to paint the eye on Shabbat.

Whereupon Rabbi Shmuel bar Yehudah said: He who acts according to

Yehudah profanes Shabbat. After some time, he himself had a sore eye. He sent to ask of Rav Yehudah: "Is it permitted or forbidden?" [Rav Yehudah] sent back [the following reply:] "To everyone else it is permitted, but to you it is forbidden." [Avodah Zarah 28b]

### -Burning the midnight oil

Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: In truth, that man, Hananiah, son of Hezekiah by name, is to be remembered for a blessing, because if it weren't for him, the Book of Ezekiel would have been hidden [excluded from the Bible], for its words contradicted the Torah. What did he do? Three hundred barrels of oil were taken up to him [for lighting] and he sat in an upper chamber and reconciled them. [Shabbat 13b]

### -Who is hot-tempered?

Rabbi Yosei taught in Sepphoris: Elijah [the Prophet] was a hot-tempered man. Now, he [Elijah] used to visit him, but [after Elijah found out he said that] he did not come for three days. When he came on the fourth day, [Rabbi Yosei] said to him, "Why did you not come before?" He replied, "[Because] you called me hot-tempered." He retorted, "Well, does this incident not prove that the Master is hot-tempered?" [Sanhedrin 113a-b]

### -The rabbis frequently argued strenuously and criticized one another

Rabbi Sheshet said: It seems that Rav made this statement while he was sleepy and about to doze off. [Yevamot 24b]

Translation: I don't know what he was smoking...

Commentator: It's a compliment: He would never say that while fully awake!

### -Charisma and miracle-working vs dignity and rationality

Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. The son of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill. He said to him: Hanina, my son, pray for him that he may live. [Hanina] put his head between his knees and prayed for him and he lived. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: If [I] had stuck [my] head between [my] knees for the whole day, no notice would have been taken of [me].

-His wife said to him: Is Hanina [then] greater than you?

-He replied: No. But he is like a servant before the king [who is always close to the king and knows him well], and I am like a nobleman [who



appears before the king only when summoned for important matters of state]. [Berachot 34b]

Putting down one who is better while recognizing his talents!

-Do as I say, not as I do!

Ben Azzai [who never married] said: [A man who does not marry and have children] is as if he had shed blood and diminished the Divine Image...

Rabbi Eleazar said to him: Teachings are becoming when they are uttered by those who practice them, but you, Ben Azzai, preach well, but do not practice your teaching!

He pleaded: That is because I desire to study Torah. The world will have to be preserved by others. [Gen. R. 34:14]

-Some matters are not decided by complex arguments!

Rabbi Hisda asked Rabbi Huna: Is it permitted to recite kiddush over beer? He said to him: I asked Rav, and Rav asked Rabbi Hiyya, and Rabbi Hiyya asked Rabbi [Yehuda Hanasi]...

[Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi tasted beer] and found its flavor excellent. He said: Over such [a marvel] as this it is fitting to recite kiddush and to utter all the psalms and praises in the world. But that night, the beer made him sick [with diarrhea].

[In the morning,] he said: Since it causes us pain, it is not fitting to [use for kiddush] to propitiate [God]...

Our Rabbis [therefore decreed]: You do not recite kiddush over beer...

You recite kiddush over wine only, and you say a blessing over wine only.

[Pesachim 107a]

Others liked beer and it did not disagree with them. But if it disagrees with the master, it is not allowed!

Halacha: Other beverages, such as beer or whisky, may be used for daytime kiddush (a rabbinic mitzvah); but wine is preferred for nighttime kiddush (a biblical mitzvah).

-Go off on a spaceship?

The Talmud has a twist on whether Jews may take time from Torah study for secular subjects:

Ben Damah, the son of Rabbi Ishmael's sister, once asked Rabbi Ishmael, "May one such as myself, who have studied the entire Torah, learn Greek philosophy [*chochmat yevanit*]?"

He [Rabbi Ishmael] then read to him the following verse [from the Book of Joshua], "This Book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; but you shall meditate on it day and night." [Joshua 1:8] Therefore, go and find a

time that is neither day nor night, and at that time you may study Greek philosophy! [Menachot 99b]

Why did he phrase it that way, rather than just saying “No”? Was he telling him to go off on a spaceship, where there is no day and no night, to study Greek philosophy to his heart’s content?

#### -Silently teaching the teacher

While Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] was delivering a lecture, he smelled garlic. Thereupon he said: Let the one who has eaten garlic leave. Rabbi Hiyya got up and left [not because he had eaten garlic, but to save the real offender from public humiliation]. Then, all the other disciples got up one by one and left [also]. [Sanhedrin 11a]

#### -Vows made from false premises are not valid

Mishna: If one vows,  
“I will not marry that ugly woman”, when in fact she is beautiful;  
“that dark-skinned woman”, when in fact she is fair;  
“that short woman”, when in fact she is tall,  
[the vow is not valid and] he is permitted to marry her,  
not because she was ugly, and became beautiful; or dark-skinned and turned fair; or short and grew tall; but because the vow was made in error.  
[Someone] vowed not to have intercourse with [a certain woman]. She was taken into Rabbi Yishmael's house and [fixed up so she looked] beautiful.  
My son, exclaimed Rabbi Yishmael to him, did you vow not to have intercourse with this woman?  
[The man did not recognize her and replied:] No!  
Rabbi Yishmael then declared his vow invalid. [You obviously did not know who you were talking about when you made the vow.] [Nedarim 66a]

#### -Mordechai as father and mother

##### Bible:

And [Mordechai] brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. And the maid was beautiful and of good presence; and, when her father and her mother died, Mordechai took her for himself as a daughter. [Esther 2:7]

##### Midrash:

Said Rabbi Yudan: One time [Mordechai] went looking among all the wet nurses [in town for someone to nurse Esther] but could not immediately find one. So he himself nursed her. Rabbi Berekiah and Rabbi Abbahu said in Rabbi Eleazar's name: Milk came to him and he nursed her. When

Rabbi Abbahu taught this publicly, the assembly laughed. He said to them: Is this not [taught] in a Mishnah? [Machshirin 6:7] [The Mishna says:] Rabbi Shim'on ben Eleazar said: The milk of a male is [ritually] clean. [Genesis R 30:8]

#### Mishna:

The following cause neither uncleanness nor susceptibility to uncleanness: sweat, ill-smelling secretion, excrement, blood issuing with any of these... blood from the slaughtering of cattle and wild animals and birds that are unclean, and blood from bloodletting for healing... Rabbi Shim'on ben Eleazar says: the milk of a male is [also] clean. [Machshirin 6:7]

This is scientifically correct and documented: A male CAN lactate “in the presence of physiological stimuli connected with nursing infants”, but it’s rare.

(A midrash is either a true story passed on from generation to generation or something meant to teach a lesson. If no lesson is obvious, as is the case here, then it must be true!)

-Only for the sake of Israel!

[God will gather the nations to judge them.]

The Kingdom of Edom [that is, Rome] will enter first before Him...

The Holy One, blessed be He, will then say to them: With what have you occupied yourselves? They will reply: “O Lord of the Universe, we have established many marketplaces, we have erected many baths, we have accumulated much gold and silver, and all this we did only for the sake of Israel, that they might [have time] to study the Torah.”

The Holy One, blessed be He, will say in reply: “You foolish ones among peoples! All that which you have done, you have done only to satisfy your own desires. You have established marketplaces for courtesans; baths, to revel in them...” They will then depart crushed in spirit.

On the departure of the Kingdom of Rome, Persia will step forth.

The Holy One, blessed be He, will ask of them: “With what have you occupied yourselves?” And they will reply: “Sovereign of the Universe, we have built many bridges, we have captured many cities, we have waged many wars, and all this for the sake of Israel, that they might [be free to] engage in the study of Torah.”

Then the Holy One, blessed be He, will say to them: “You foolish ones among peoples! You have built bridges in order to extract toll, you have subdued cities, so as to impose forced labor...”

They, too will then depart crushed in spirit... [Avodah Zarah 2b]

God, you can do better!

Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedath found himself in very great poverty... The Rabbis came to see him... [He told them: Just now] the Holy One, Blessed be He, was sitting by my side and I asked Him: How long will I suffer in this world?

And He replied: Eleazar, my son, do you want me to turn back the world to its very beginnings? Perhaps then you might be [re]born in better conditions?

I replied: All this [upheaval], and then only perhaps?...

[God] replied: As a reward... for refusing [my offer] I will grant you in the next world thirteen rivers of balsam oil as clear as the Euphrates and the Tigris, which you will be able to enjoy.

I asked: [That's it?] And nothing more? ... Am I asking from someone who has nothing?

[God] then snapped at my forehead and exclaimed: Eleazar, my son, I have [made a ray of light radiate from your forehead.] [An expression of love.] [Taanit 25a]

-Says who?

A Persian came to Rav and said to him, "Teach me the Torah." He [consented, and, pointing to the first letter of the alphabet], told him, "Say aleph." The man remarked, "Who says this is aleph"? There may be others who say that it is not!"

"Say beth", to which he remarked, "Who says that this is beth?"

Rav rebuked him and drove him out in anger.

He went to Shmuel and said to him, "Teach me the Torah."

He told him, "Say aleph". The man remarked, "Who says this is aleph?"

"Say beth", to which he remarked, "Who said this is beth?"

The teacher [firmly] took hold of his ear and the man exclaimed, "My ear! my ear!" Shmuel asked him, "Who said this is your ear?"

He answered, "Everybody knows that this is my ear", and the teacher retorted, "In the same way, everybody knows this is aleph and that is beth".

Immediately the Persian was silenced and accepted the instruction. [Eccl R 7:16]

Wake up!

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] was once lecturing and his audience became drowsy. In order to rouse them, he said: "One woman in Egypt gave birth to 600,000!" A student by the name of Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Yosei asked him: "Who was she?" He replied: "It was Yocheved, mother of Moses. Moses was equivalent to the 600,000 Israelites [who left Egypt]." [Song of Songs Rabbah 1:65]

-I am very humble!

Our Rabbis taught:  
When Rabbi Eliezer died, [scholarship] ceased...  
When Abba Yosei ben Ketanta died, piety ceased...  
When Ben Azzai died, diligence [in the study of Torah] ceased.  
When Ben Zoma died, [good teaching] ceased...  
When Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] died, humility and fear of heaven ceased...  
Rabbi Yosef [replied:] Don't include humility, because I am still here [and I am very humble]. [Sotah 49b]

### -Fatherly advice

Rabbi Akiva taught his son Rabbi Yehoshua: My son... do not dwell in a town whose leaders are scholars. [Because scholars are bad administrators!]  
[Pesachim 112a]

### -Where can I get some?

A pious student had a father who drank too much wine and [frequently] collapsed in the streets in drunken stupor... One time, it was raining and the pious son... saw a drunkard lying in the gutter with water running all over him... He brought his father there and showed him the drunk [to show him the consequences of excessive drinking]. What did the elderly father do? He went to the drunk, [came close,] and asked him, "Where did you get such good wine to drink?" [Midrash Tanhuma, Lev. Shemini 11]

### -How ugly you are!

Once, Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Shim'on was coming from Migdal Gedor, from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his ass by the riverside and was feeling happy and elated because he had studied much Torah.

He came upon an extremely ugly man who greeted him, saying: "Peace be upon you, Sir."

[The rabbi,] however, did not return his greeting but instead said to him: "Empty one, how ugly you are! Are all the people in your city as ugly as you are?"

The man replied: "I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, 'How Ugly is the vessel that you have made'."

Rabbi Eleazar then realized that he had done wrong, so he came down from the ass and prostrated himself before the man and said to him: "I submit myself to you, forgive me."

The man replied: "I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to him, 'How ugly is the vessel that you have made'."

[Rabbi Eleazar] walked behind him until he reached his native city. When his fellow citizens came out to meet [the rabbi] they greeted him with the words: "Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master!"

The man then asked them: "Whom are you calling that?"

They replied: "The man who is walking behind you."

Thereupon he exclaimed: "If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel!"

The people then asked him: "Why?"

He replied: "Such and such has he done to me."

They said to him: "Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is greatly learned in the Torah."

The man replied: "For your sakes I will forgive him, but only on condition that he does not act this way in the future!"

[Taanit 20a-b]

### -Order of precedence

The Talmud actually established a strict hierarchy in Israel, for protocol purposes. At the very top is the scholar. Why? The Talmud answers:

A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel, because if a scholar dies there is no one to replace him, but if a king of Israel dies, anybody in Israel is eligible to replace him. [Horayot 13a]

After the king comes the High Priest (the *kohen gadol*), then prophets, then lower-level priests, then Levites, then ordinary Jews, then bastards:

But if a bastard is a scholar, he takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest. [Horayot 13a]

## Not for ladies

### -All behavior is guided by the Torah!

Rabbi Akiva said: Once I [secretly] followed Rabbi Yehoshua to a bathroom...

Ben Azzai said to him: "Did you dare to take such liberties with our master?"

He replied: "It is a matter of Torah, and I have to learn."

Rabbi Kahana once hid under Rav's bed. He heard him chatting [with his wife], joking [with her, then] doing what he needed to do...

[Rabbi Kahane whispered to himself:] You would think [my master] has never eaten this dish before!

[Rav heard him and] said to him: "Kahana, are you here? Get out, because it is rude."

He replied: "It is a matter of Torah, and I have to learn!" [Berachot 62a]  
The rabbis were not shy about discussing these matters, but the students felt a picture is worth a thousand words.

-Let's be practical, OK?

Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy?  
Rabbi Meir said: He who takes pleasure in his wealth.  
Rabbi Tarfon said: He who possesses 100 vineyards, 100 fields and 100 slaves working in them.  
Rabbi Akiba said: He who has a beautiful and virtuous wife.  
Rabbi Yosei said: He who has an indoor restroom near his [dining] table.  
[Shabbat 25b]

-Worship or not?

The Moabites had a God, Baal Peor, that was worshipped by...  
defecating on it. The Talmud asks: If a Jew does it on the idol,  
intending it as a gesture of contempt, is he guilty of idolatry? Yes!

Mishna: He who defecates before Baal Peor [is guilty of idolatry, for] this is  
the mode of worshipping him. [Sanhedrin 60b]

Gemara: Our Rabbis taught: Sabta, a [Jewish] townsman of Avlas...  
entered [a shrine to Baal] Peor, defecated on the idol, and wiped himself  
on the idol's nose. The attendants praised him, saying, "No man has ever  
served this idol so well".

He who defecates before Baal Peor thereby serves it, even if his intention  
was to degrade it. [Sanhedrin 64a]

Many Gentiles were equally revolted!

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed:  
"If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world."  
She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world.  
When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, "How is this one  
worshipped?" They told her, "One eats greens and drinks strong drink,  
and then defecates before the idol." The woman responded, "I'd rather  
become ill again than worship an idol in such a [disgusting] manner."  
[Sanhedrin 64a]

-The limits of politeness

Rabbi Nachman said: All foul language is forbidden except where directed  
at idolatry, in which case it is permitted...  
Rabbi Huna ben Manoah said in the name of Rabbi Aha the son of Rabbi  
Ika: A Jew is permitted to tell [an idolater], "Take your idol and stick it up  
your rear end." [Megillah 25b]

## -Who is the fairest of them all?

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of exceptional beauty in the world: Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther...  
Rabbi Joshua ben Korha said: [Actually, I heard that] Esther was fallow, [even though she was] endowed with great charm. [In that case, they said], Vashti should replace Esther in the list.  
Our Rabbis taught: Rahav inspired lust by her name [alone]...  
Rabbi Isaac said: Whoever says. "Rahav, Rahav", has an immediate orgasm.  
Rabbi Nahman said to him: I say "Rahav, Rahav", and nothing happens to me!  
[Rabbi Isaac] replied: I was speaking of someone who [really] knows her and is intimate with her...  
Yael inspired lust by her voice, Abigail by the memories she left in people, Michal, Saul's daughter, by her appearance. [Megillah 13a, 15a]  
(But elsewhere Talmud says Eve was more beautiful than Sarah [Bava Batra 58a]. Tosafot says she is not on the list because only daughters of human beings are mentioned!)

## -Beauty matters!

Happy the man whose wife is beautiful! The number of his days is doubled. [Sanhedrin 100b]

## -Size matters?

Rabbi Yochanan said: The penis of Rabbi Ishmael son of Rabbi Yosei was as large as a nine-kav canteen. Rabbi Papa said: Rabbi Yochanan's penis was as large as a five-kav canteen; others say, three kavs. The penis of Rabbi Papa himself was as [large as] a Harpanian basket. [Baba Metzia 84a]  
-Tosafot: They were overweight, but could still father children because they were well-endowed. Latter is mentioned to dispel doubt that their children are really theirs. (See earlier story in Bava Metzia 84a. But different rabbis are mentioned there and Rabbi Yochanan could not have been overweight – see below.)  
-Chochmat Shlomo: Talmud says: The greater a man, the greater his evil inclination. [Sukkah 52a] So even though they had unusually great desire, they overcame it [being Sages].  
-Puritanical Soncino translates "penis" as "waist"!

## -Rabbis comparing their beauty

Rabbi Johanan said: I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem's men of outstanding beauty...



But that is not so; for did not a Master say: Rabbi Kahana's beauty is a reflection of Rabbi Abbahu's beauty; Rabbi Abbahu's beauty is a reflection of our forefather Jacob's beauty; our forefather Jacob's beauty was a reflection of Adam's beauty; whereas Rabbi Johanan is omitted! Rabbi Johanan is different, because he lacked a beard.

Rabbi Johanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikvah. He said, "When the daughters of Israel come out of the bath, let them look at me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I am."

The Rabbis said to him: Do you not fear an evil eye? He replied, I am of the seed of Joseph, against whom an evil eye is powerless... [Bava Metzia 84a]

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Johanan went in to visit him... He noticed that... Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep?... He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty [of yours] that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept. [Berachot 5b]

## -When to marry

Our Rabbis taught:... A man should first study Torah and then marry. But if he cannot [live] without a wife, he should first marry and then study. Rav Yehudah said in Shmuel's name: The halachah is: [A man] first marries and then studies. Rabbi Yochanan said: Is he going to study [with] a millstone around his neck!..

[A student came before Rabbi Huna bare-headed.]

The rabbi asked: Why do you not have head-covering?

He replied: Because I am not married.

[Rabbi Huna then] turned his face away from him [and said:] Do not appear before me [again] until you are married... He who is twenty and unmarried spends all his days in... sinful thoughts.

-Raba said: The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught likewise: Until the age of twenty, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and waits. When will he take a wife? As soon as one becomes twenty, if he still has not married, [God] exclaims, May he be blasted!

-Rabbi Hisda said: The reason I am superior to my colleagues is that I married at sixteen [and so my mind was entirely free for study]. And if I had married at fourteen, I would have said to Satan, [I defy you! You can't tempt me!] Rava said to Rabbi Nathan ben Ammi: While you still [have some authority on your son, marry him off]. [Kidd. 29b-30a]

Ulla visited Rav Yehudah in Pumbeditha. He saw that Rabbi Yitzhaq, son of Rav Yehudah, was grown up, yet was not married. He asked him: Why has the master not taken a wife for his son?

[He answered:] Who knows where I can find a wife for my son from a suitable family? [I do not know who is of pure descent.]  
He retorted: Do WE know from where WE are descended? Perhaps from [Jewish women raped by invaders]. Granted, if an idolater or a slave has intercourse with a Jewish woman, their child is [Jewish and] legitimate. But perhaps [we are descended from adulterers and wife swappers, which would make us bastards!].  
Then what shall I do? – he asked.  
Take someone from a peaceful family. [Quarrelsome families are probably unfit!...] Do a test: When you see two people quarreling, observe which one quiets down first. This one is of superior birth. [Kiddushin 71b]

-Let's go a little faster, shall we?

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] was engaged in preparations for the marriage of his son into the family of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra. It was agreed that [his son] should [first] spend twelve years [studying] at the academy. When the girl was led before [the son, and he saw how beautiful she was], he said to them, "Let's make it [just] six years!" When they made [the girl] pass before him [a second time] he said, "[Actually,] I would rather marry [her first] and then go [to the academy.]"  
He felt ashamed [by his fickleness], but his father said to him: My son, you have the mind of your Creator. In the Torah, [God] first says:  
You bring them in and plant them. [Ex. 15:17]  
But then later [God] says:  
And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.  
[Ex. 25:8].  
[Ketubot 62b]

In other words, God first told the Israelites to build the sanctuary after they settled in the promised land, but then He ordered them to build it while they were still in the wilderness, so He could be with them even sooner!

-Sex-crazed

A funny, puzzling, down-to-earth, human, touching, poetic story with a moral:

It was said of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia that he did not leave out any prostitute in the world without having sex with her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain prostitute in one of the seaports who accepted a purse of denarii for payment, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was having sex with her, she passed some gas and said: Just as this gas I passed will never return to its place, so will Eleazar ben Dordia never be accepted in repentance.

So he went and sat between two hills and mountains and said: O hills and mountains, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah],

For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed! [Isaiah 54:10]

So he said: Heaven and earth, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah],

For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall become old like a garment. [Isaiah 51:6]

He then said: Sun and moon, plead with God to have mercy on me!

But they also replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah],

Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed. [Isaiah 24:23]

He said: O stars and constellations, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They said: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah],

And all the hosts of heaven shall rot away. [Isaiah 34:4]

He said: Then the matter depends on me alone!

He placed his head between his knees and wept aloud until his soul departed.

Then a heavenly voice announced: Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordia [has been accepted in] the World to Come!

[When he heard this story] Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] wept and said: Some acquire eternal life after many years, others in [only] one hour!

[He] also added: Those who repent are not [only] accepted, they are even called Rabbi! [Avodah Zara 17a]

## -Playing up to prejudices for a good cause

-Is it within the power of men to increase the number of their sons...?  
[Yes.] If they restrain themselves during intercourse to allow their wives to have an orgasm first, their children shall be males, and they will acquire great merit.

-Rabbi Kattina said: I could make all my children to be males.

-Rava said: One who wishes all his children to be males should have intercourse twice in succession. [Because the second time he is better able to restrain himself.] [Niddah 31a-b]

## -Everything is permitted in bed

Puritanical vs anti-puritanical streaks in Talmud. The latter won:

-Rabbi Yochanan ben Dahabai said: The Ministering Angels told me four things:

-People are born lame because [their parents] practiced anal intercourse; dumb, because they kiss that place [i.e., practice oral intercourse]; deaf, because they talk while having intercourse; blind, because they look at that place.

-Rabbi Yochanan said: This is the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan ben Dahabai. But our Sages said: The law is not according to what Rabbi Yochanan ben Dahabai says. A man may do whatever he wants with his wife [with her consent]. [Nedarim 20a-b]

Rabbis refuse to be browbeaten by terrible consequences and by appeal to high authority. Rebuke wording is particularly strong.

### -Manners

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai observed: There are four things that the Holy One, blessed be He, hates, and I, too, dislike them: When a man enters his house or his neighbor's house suddenly, or holds his penis while urinating, or urinates in front of his bed, or has sexual intercourse in the presence of any living creature... Rabbah ben Rav Huna used to chase away the wasps from his curtained bed. Abaye drove away the flies.

Rabbah chased away the mosquitoes. [Niddah 16b-17a; also Lev. R. 21:8]

The rabbi generally agrees with God, but doesn't go as far as God: God "hates" these things, but he only "dislikes" them!

### -Virgin or not?

The Torah does not allow the High Priest to marry a woman who is not a virgin. [Lev. 21:13] So the Talmud asks: What if she is a virgin who became pregnant?

Ben Zoma was [further] asked: May a High Priest marry a maiden who has become pregnant? [In such a case,] should we consider Shmuel's statement, who said, "I can have repeated sexual intercourse without [causing any] bleeding [so the woman remains a virgin]"? Or perhaps the case of Shmuel is rare [in which case we can ignore it, because we do not take into account exceptional cases]?

He replied: The case of Shmuel is rare, but we do consider [the possibility] that she may have conceived in a bath [if she bathed in water into which a man had discharged his sperm]. [Chagigah 14b-15a]

This was my father's explanation when I was ten! ["If a woman bathes in a pool where a man fainted, she could become pregnant."]

### -Telling it like it is

[Some] things in this world hint at pleasures in the World to Come:  
Shabbat, sunshine, sex, and going to the bathroom. [Ber. 57b]

#### -Four in bed

When a divorced man marries a divorced woman, four go to bed. [Pes. 112a]

#### -Stay away from my husband!

Homa, Abaye's wife, came to Rava [after the death of Abaye, her third husband,] and asked him, Give me an allowance for food. He did so. Give me an allowance for wine. He said to her: I know that [your husband] did not drink wine, [so you probably did not have it in the house]. [She replied:] By the life of the Master, he gave me to drink from cups as long as this [and she showed him her bare arm]. When he saw her uncovered arm, its beauty radiated through the courtroom. Rava got up, [interrupted the proceedings,] went home, and had intercourse with [his wife.]... [His wife asked:] Who has been at court today? He replied: Homa, [the late] Abaye's wife. Thereupon she followed [Homa], striking her with leather straps and drove her out of the town of Mahuza. She said to her: You have already killed three [men, your previous husbands who died], and now you come to kill another [man, my husband]! [Ketubot 65a]

#### -Too old

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] asked Rabbi Shim'on ben Halafta: Why [did you not come to visit me] on the Festival...? [He answered: Small] rocks have become large, the near has become far, two have become three, and the peacemaker of the home does not work anymore. [Shabbat 152a]

Meaning: I have grown old.

-Small rocks have become large: What was a small matter before is now a strenuous undertaking.

-The near has become far: I can't easily move around.

-Two have become three: My two legs are no longer enough; I need a cane.

-The peacemaker of the home does not work anymore: I can no longer perform sexually!

#### -Oldtime remedies

Rabbi Yaakov was suffering from a slit in the rear end, and Rabbi Ammi (some say Rabbi Assi) directed him to take seven grains of purple coloured alkali, wrap them up in the collar of a shirt, tie it round with a white thread [of cattle-hair], dip it in white naphtha and burn it, and apply [the ashes] to the sore. While preparing this he was to take the kernel of a

bramble nut and apply its split side to the slit. That is, if there is a slit externally. But what [is one to do] if it is internal? One should take some fat of a goat that has not borne any young, melt it and apply it. Or one should take three melon leaves which have faded in the shade, burn them and apply the ashes. In the absence of these, let one apply snail-shells, or else take olive-oil mixed with wax and let him be covered with rag of linen in the summer and cotton wool in the winter. [Avodah Zarah 28a-b]

## **The Jewish Sherlock Holmes**

An Athenian... bought a [Jewish] slave who was blind [in one eye]... The seller said to him... [He may be half-blind, but] he is very wise and can see far away [with his one good eye].

-When they came out of the gate, the slave said to him, Let us hurry, so we can overtake the caravan [in front of us].

-[The master did not see any caravan, and asked:] Is there, then, a caravan in front of us?

-Yes, and a female camel is in front of it. She is blind in one eye. She has twins in her womb, and is carrying two skin bottles, one containing wine and the other vinegar. She is four miles away and the camel-driver is a Gentile.

-[The master] said to the slave, Oh you, who belongs to a stiff-necked people! You are blind in one eye yourself, so how do you know the camel is blind in one eye?

-He answered, I notice that one side of the path has been grazed [by the camel] but not the other.

-And how do you know that there are twins in her womb?

-He replied, She lay down, and I noticed from the depression [on the ground] that there are two of them.

-And how do you know that she is carrying two skin-bottles, one containing wine and the other vinegar?

-He answered, From the drippings. Wine is absorbed into the ground but vinegar [leaves bubbles].

-And how do you know that the camel-driver is a Gentile?

-He replied, Because [I can tell that] he urinated in the middle of the road. A Jew would not do that, but rather move to a corner.

-And how do you know that [the caravan] is four miles away?

-He said to him, The mark of the camel's hoof is perceptible up to four miles, but not beyond. [Lamentations Rabbah 1:12]

The prime reason for antisemitism: Envy of Jews, who are viewed as smart and successful.

The Talmudic mind (not in Talmud, but about Talmud):

-After months of negotiation with the authorities, a Talmudist from Odessa was granted permission to visit Moscow. He boarded the train and found an empty seat. At the next stop a young man got on and sat next to him.

-The scholar looked at the young man and thought: This fellow doesn't look like a peasant, and if he isn't a peasant he probably comes from this district. If he comes from this district, then he must be Jewish because this is, after all, a largely Jewish district.

-On the other hand, if he is a Jew, where could he be going? I'm the only Jew in our district who has permission to travel Moscow. Ah, but just outside Moscow there is a little village called Samvet, and Jews don't need special permission to go there. But why would he be going to Samvet? He's probably going to visit one of the Jewish families there. But how many Jewish families are there in Samvet? Only two - the Bernsteins and the Steinbergs. The Bernsteins are up in years, so a nice-looking young fellow like him must be visiting the Steinbergs.

-But why is he going? The Steinbergs have only daughters, so maybe he's their son-in-law. But if he is, then which daughter did he marry? They say that Sarah married a nice lawyer from Budapest, and Esther married a businessman from Zhitomer, so it must be Sarah's husband. Which means that his name is Alexander Cohen, if I'm not mistaken.

-But if he comes from Budapest, with all the anti-Semitism they have there, he must have changed his name. What's the Hungarian equivalent of Cohen? Kovacs.

-But if they allowed him to change his name, he must have some special status. What could it be? A doctorate from the University.

-At this point the scholar turns to the young man and says, "How do you do, Dr Kovacs?"

"Very well, thank you, sir," answered the startled passenger. "But how do you know my name?"

"Oh," replied the Talmudist, "it was obvious."

## Checks and balances

Judaism has built-in checks and balances, witness:

The king or the High Priest may not be members of the [Sanhedrin's] board for [deciding when to add a month to the year]: The king on account of the upkeep of the army, and the High Priest because of the cold. [Sanhedrin 18b]

Meaning:

-The king is presumed biased in favor of adding a month, because he pays his soldiers by the year, so adding a month makes the year longer!

-The High Priest is presumed biased against adding a month, because he has to immerse five times in the mikvah on Yom Kippur, and if Yom Kippur falls a month later the water is colder! [Yoma 31b]

These are very human considerations!

## Trying to fault the Torah

### -Is God a thief?

The Emperor once said to Rabban Gamliel: Your God is a thief, [because he stole one of Adam's ribs].

His daughter said:... We must strengthen the guard in the palace. Thieves visited us last night and stole a silver pitcher, leaving a golden one in its place.

-[The Emperor] exclaimed: I wish such thieves would visit us every day!

-That is what Adam said when he lost a rib and gained a wife.

-[The Emperor] replied: What I meant was, God should have taken the rib from Adam openly, not while he was asleep...

-She then placed a piece of raw meat under her armpit, then offered it to him to eat.

-I find it loathsome, he exclaimed.

-That's how Adam would have found Eve if she had been taken from him openly.

[Sanhedrin 39a]

### -Is God a priest?

A certain heretic said to Rabbi Abbahu: Your God is a priest, since [he says in the Torah],

And take for Me terumah [which is the tithe on produce given only to priests]. [Ex. 25:2]

Now, [the Torah says]:

And [God] buried [Moses] in a valley in the land of Moab. [Deut. 34:6]

[And we know that all priests must bathe in a mikvah after contact with the dead.] [Lev. 22:4]

So where did [God] bathe? If you reply, "In water", is it not written [in Isaiah]:

[God] measures the waters in the hollow of His hand? [Is. 40:12]?

[So there isn't enough water for God to be immersed in.]

-[Rabbi Abbahu] answered: He bathed in fire, for it is written [in the same Isaiah verse]:

Behold, the Lord will come in fire. [Is. 66:15]

-[The heretic then asked:] Is then purification by fire effective?

-[Rabbi Abbahu] answered: Not only yes, but bathing [for purification] should preferably be in fire, [and water is merely a substitute for those who cannot stand fire] for [God says in the Torah],

All that can stand the fire, make it go through the fire, and they shall be clean... and all that cannot stand the fire make them go through the water. [Num. 31:23]

[Sanhedrin 39a]



The Torah referred to vessels, but Abbahu made it apply to people to make his point!

## **Fervor**

The Talmud mentions that some people, who did not commit sins, wanted an opportunity to bring a sin-offering [so as to experience ALL mitzvot], so they took a Nazirite vow, because a Nazir must bring a sin-offering when he completes his vow! [Nedarim 10a]

## **Dreams**

The Sages taught that:

All dreams follow their interpretation. [Ber. 55b]

This means that what is suggested in the interpretation is what will actually happen. Call it auto-suggestion, psychological influence, or mind-over-matter, but it implies that the dreamer is so profoundly shaken by the alleged meaning of his dream that somehow he makes it happen:

Rabbi Bana'ah [said]: There were 24 interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. I had a dream once and went around to all of them, and they all gave different interpretations, and all interpretations were fulfilled. This confirms that... "All dreams follow [their interpretation]"... [As the Torah says in Genesis]... "And it came to pass \*as [Joseph] interpreted [the dreams] to us\*, and so it was." [Gen. 41:13] [Ber. 55b]

Another story:

[The Chaldean] Bar Hedyā was an interpreter of dreams. He used to give a favorable interpretation to those who paid him and an unfavorable interpretation to those who did not pay him.

Abaye and Rava each had a dream. Abaye gave him a zuz, but Rava did not give him anything. [So, to Abaye he gave many good interpretations and to Rava many bad ones]...

One day Rava [learned the teaching:] "All dreams follow [their interpretations]". He [understood that the interpreter was \*making\* these bad things happen to him and] exclaimed: You wretch! It all depended on you and you gave me all this pain!... May it be God's will that [you] be delivered up to the Government, and that they have no mercy on [you]! [Ber. 56a]

So the Sages took pains to provide good interpretations to the dreams of the people, and even when the people dreamt that they committed terrible capital crimes, the Sages found ways to make it sound good, witness this very surprising Talmudic passage:

-If one dreams that he has intercourse with his mother, he can expect understanding, since it says [in the Book of Proverbs], “You will call understanding “mother”.” [Prov. 2:3]

-If one dreams he has intercourse with a woman who is engaged, he can expect knowledge of Torah, since it says [in Deuteronomy], “*Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morashah kehillat Yaakov* -- Moses commanded us [the Torah], an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” [Deut. 33:4] *Morashah*, meaning inheritance, can also be read *Me’orasah*, meaning engaged.

-If one dreams he has intercourse with his sister, he can expect wisdom, since it says [in Proverbs], “Say to wisdom, you are my sister.” [Prov. 7:4]

-If one dreams he has intercourse with a married woman [he does not know], he can be confident that he is destined for the “World to Come”. [Ber. 57a]

There is not even a hint of a rebuke, because none of this actually happened. No one did anything wrong, no one planned anything wrong, no one did even thought anything wrong; and people are not responsible for their dreams!

## Lying

-Lying for the sake of peace is allowed

Aaron, Moses' brother, was a lover of peace, and he also lied to achieve peace, witness this story in the Talmud:

When two people had a dispute, Aaron went and sat near one of them and said to him: “My son, see what your friend is doing? He is beating his heart and tearing his clothing saying: “Woe is me. How can I lift up my eyes and look at my friend. I am ashamed of myself since I was the one who offended him.” Aaron would sit with him until he removed the hatred from his heart.

Aaron would then go and sit next to the other and say to him: “My son, see what your friend is doing? He is beating his heart and tearing his clothing saying: “Woe is me. How can I lift up my eyes and look at my friend. I am ashamed of myself since I was the one who offended him.” Aaron would sit with him until he removed the hatred from his heart.

When the two met, they would they hugged and kissed each other.

[Avot D’Rabbi Nathan 12:3]

-Lying for protection from loss or harm is allowed

Mishna: One may tell murderers, plunderers, and [corrupt] tax collectors that the produce they wish to steal is *terumah* [which only priests may eat], even if it is not *terumah*, or that the property they wish to seize belongs to the Royal House, even if it does not. [Mishna, Nedarim 27b-28a]

## -Lying to save lives is allowed

Rabbi Yochanan was sick with scurvy, and he went to a certain non-Jewish woman [for treatment]... She [said]: Swear that you will not reveal [the remedy]. He said: I swear to the God of Israel I will not reveal it. She then divulged it to him and the next day he revealed it in his [public] lecture.

But did he not swear to her? He swore: To the God of Israel I will not reveal it, [implying that] I may reveal it to His people Israel.

But is this not a profanation of the [Divine] Name? [No, because] he stated [that provision] to her originally. [Avodah Zarah 28a]

## -Lying for humility, modesty, and to spare others is allowed

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: In these three matters rabbis should hide the truth: Tractate, bed, and hospitality. [Bava Metzia 23b-24a]

This means:

-If someone asks, out of curiosity, if you know well a certain Talmudic tractate, say no to be humble. (But if asked specific questions, share your knowledge!)

-If someone asks, out of curiosity, if you have had sex the night before, say no because it is a private matter. Not even, "It's none of your business", which is what most of us would say, but "No. Get this picture out of your mind."

-If someone asks, out of curiosity, if the friend you stayed with was hospitable, do not praise your friend too highly, because others might burden him by trying to stay with him to get similar treatment.

## How many infractions?

The rabbis played the game of asking how many infractions it is possible to commit with a simple gesture: [Makkot 21b]

Mishna: It is possible to plough only one furrow and commit eight transgressions:

1 - If a man ploughs with an ox and a donkey [yoked together], [Deuteronomy 22:10]

2,3 - and these [animals] were consecrated for the Sanctuary, [and thus must not be used for ordinary labor], [Deuteronomy 15:19]

4 - and [the plough is being drawn over] different types of seeds, [Deuteronomy 22:9]

5 - during the sabbatical year, [Leviticus 25:4]

6 - on a festival day, [Leviticus 23:7]

7,8 – and [the man is] a priest [Leviticus 21:1] and a Nazirite [Numbers 6:6] and the plot is located in a cemetery.

Highlights lesser-known mitzvot with a fictional story. Teaching:  
Even the simplest actions can have far-reaching consequences!

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary rabbi Aryeh Kaplan was once asked if there are any jokes in the Talmud. He replied, “Yes, but they are all old.”