

Humor in Torah and Talmud, Part 5

Torah (Theme: God is angry at us)

1-God loses it

[The Israelites repeatedly ask Moses for meat in the desert. God tells Moses:]

And say to the people... you shall eat meat. You shall not eat it for one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days; but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and you become disgusted by it.

[Numbers 11:18-20]

2-This, too, shall happen to you!

The most dreaded Torah portion is *Ki Tavo*, where God lists all the curses that will befall those who do not follow His commandments:

But it shall come to pass, if you will not listen to the voice of the Lord your God, to take care to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. [Deut. 28:15]

Follows a long string of dreaded curses, beginning with:

Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field... [Deut. 28:16]

And ending with:

Also, every illness and every plague, that is not written in this Book of the Torah, the Lord will bring it upon you, until you are destroyed. [Deut 28:61]

It's not even exclusive: Whatever you dread most, whatever it is, shall happen to you!

3-Moses' masterful plea

The Israelites revert to idolatry by building and worshiping the Golden Calf. Moses pleads before God on behalf of Israel, using a

remarkable series of **ten arguments** to influence the Almighty in favor of Israel: [Exodus 32:9-35]

-Israel is YOUR possession. 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. At least the women didn't.

-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 [there is nothing real in it], 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!

Talmud and Midrash

Israel's reputation in the World to Come

-Onkelos bar Kolonikos, the son of the sister of Titus [who was Emperor of Rome], wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and raised [his uncle] Titus from the dead by magical arts, and asked him, "Who is most important in the [other] world?" He replied: The Jews. He said: What if I joined them? He said: Their commandments are numerous, and you will not be able to fulfill them. Go and attack them in that world and you will be at the top... What is your punishment [in the other world]? He replied... Every day ... I am burnt and my ashes are scattered over the seven seas. [He had burned the Temple.]

-[Onkelos] then went and raised [the Gentile prophet] Balaam by incantations. He asked him: Who is most important in the other world? He replied: The Jews. He said: What if I joined them? He replied: [In the Torah, God says:]

You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever. [Deut. 23:7]

[He was referring to the Moabites and Ammonites who hired me to curse the Jews, but I am applying these words to the Jews themselves.]

[Onkelos] then asked: What is your punishment? He replied: With boiling hot semen [because I enticed Israel to go astray after the daughters of Moab]. [see Sanh. 106a]

-[Onkelos] then went and raised by incantations the Jewish sinners. [Some claim Jesus is intended.] He asked them: Who is most important in the other world? They replied: The Jews. What if I joined them? They replied: Seek their welfare, do not seek their harm. Whoever touches them touches the apple of [God's] eye. [Zechariah 2:12]

He said: What is your punishment?

They replied: With boiling hot excrement, since a Master has said: Whoever mocks the words of the Sages is punished with boiling hot excrement.

[A rabbi commented:] Come and see the difference between the sinners of Israel and the prophets of the nations of the world. [Balaam, who was a prophet, wished Israel harm, whereas a Jewish sinner sought their well-being.]

[Gittin 56b-57a]

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: "You worthless person, 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 have sinned against 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 [to appease him] until he reached his native city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: "Peace be upon you O Teacher, O Master!"

The man [who had been insulted] then asked them: "Whom are you calling 'My Teacher, My Master'?"

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

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

They asked him: "Why?"

He replied: "He did such and such to me."

They said to him: "Even so, [forgive him], because he is a great Torah scholar."

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]

Against hinted lashon hara

The flax dealers were drafted to do work for the [Roman] government...

Bar Chovetz escaped the attention of the officials and did not show up.

The flax merchants said to each other in the presence of the officials:

"What should we eat today?"

One said 'Chvutzin' [cheese]. This reminded the official of Bar Chovetz, and he said, 'Let's get [Bar Chovetz]!'

The counselors of Tzipori were also drafted for work. [A man named] Yochanan did not go. One worker said to another, 'Rabbi Yochanan is sick. Should we go visit him today?' The officials realized Yochanan was missing and said, 'Let's get Yochanan'. [Peah Y 8b]

The good old days

Rabbi Yochanan said: When I was young, I used to eat [the peaches the owners left on the trees because they weren't good enough to harvest.

These peaches] were better than the [prime] peaches I eat in my old age [today]. The world sure has changed. [Peah Y 62a]

Who should pursue whom?

Rabbi Shim'on said: Why did the Torah state, "When a man takes a woman" [Deut. 22:13] and not the reverse? Because it is the way of a man to pursue a woman, but it is not the way of a woman to pursue a man. This may be compared to a man who lost an item. Who searches for what?

The owner of the lost item searches for the lost item [and not the other way around. Since the woman was created from the man's lost rib, the man seeks what he has lost.] [Kidd. 2b]

Interacting with women

The Rabbis say... Do not talk extensively with a woman, because ultimately you will come to adultery. Rabbi Aḥa, son of Rabbi Yoshiya, says: Anyone who watches women will ultimately come to sin, and anyone who looks even at the heel of a woman will have indecent children [as punishment]. [Nedarim 20a]

Rabbi Akiva saves an Arab woman

The king of the Arabs put this question to Rabbi Akiva: "I am a black and my wife is a black, yet she gave birth to a white son. Shall I kill her for having played the harlot while lying with me?"

He said: "Are the figures painted in your house black or white?"

[The Arab] said: White.

[Rabbi Akiva] assured him: "When you had intercourse with her, she fixed her eyes on the white figures and bore a child like them. If you are surprised at such a possibility, study the case of our father Jacob's flock. They were influenced in their conception by the rods, as it says [in the Torah]:

And the flocks conceived at the sight of the rods. [Gen. 30:39]

The king of the Arabs acknowledged the justice of Rabbi Akiva's argument. [Numbers R. 9:34-5]

Who can I think of?

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said that... a man should not drink from one cup while setting his eyes on another cup [that is, one should not have sex with one woman while thinking about another woman].

Ravina [5th-century Babylonia] said: This statement is necessary only if both women are his wives. [Nedarim 20b]

Conclusion

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