

## *Halacha and Aggada<sup>1</sup>*

R. Ami and R. Assi were sitting before R. Yitzchak Napha. One said to him: "Let the master teach Halacha"; the other said to him: "Let the master teach Aggada" He started to teach Aggada, and one student did not let him proceed; he started to teach Halacha, and the other student did not let him proceed.

He said to them: "I will give you a parable for comparison to this matter: A man had two wives, one older and one younger. Since the younger wife plucked out his white hairs, and the older wife plucked out his black hairs, the two of them made him bald.

"That being the case, I will teach something that will please both of you. If a fire goes out and finds thorns (Shemot 22:6) — even though the fire goes out on its own, the person who kindled the fire must nevertheless pay. So the Holy One, blessed be He, says: 'I must pay for the fire that I kindled. I lit a fire in Zion, as it says: He kindled a fire in Zion and it consumed the foundations (Eichah 4:11); I will, in the future, rebuild it with fire as it says: And I will be for her... a surrounding wall of fire, and I will be the glory in her midst (Zekharya 2:9) The halachic part is as follows: Scripture begins with damages caused by a person's property and then concludes with damages caused by the person himself. This teaches that one's fire is considered like one's arrow."

(Bava Kama 60b)

### **Basic understanding questions:**

1. What were R. Ami and R. Assi arguing about?
2. How did R. Yitzchak try to please both of them?
3. What Pasuk did he use?
4. What was the Midrashic insight of the Pasuk?
5. What was the Halachic insight from the Pasuk?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Topic 1: Contrasting halacha and aggada.*

6. Introductory question. Consider halacha and aggada. Which one of these represents **tradition and consistency**, and which one represents **freshness and enthusiasm**?
7. a) The Gemara uses the examples of an older wife and a younger wife. Presumably, one corresponds to halacha and one to aggada. Which one corresponds to which?  
b) Why does the younger wife pluck the white hairs and the older woman the black hairs?

*Topic 2: Teaching students.*

8. Why do you think R. Yitzchak tried to please both students, and didn't simply tell them what he thought was best for their academic progress, and continue accordingly?
9. Do you think this open approach will always work?

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<sup>1</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 1-2.

## *Ashrei: Thanking God for Nature and the Compassion of Justice<sup>2</sup>*

R. Elazar said in the name of Ravina: 'Anyone who recites תהלה לדוד (Psalm 145, to which two introductory Pasukim are added in prayer) three times each day can trust that he is worthy of the word-to-come'

What is the reason for this?? If it is because that Psalm follows the order of the aleph bet, then we should recite אשרי תמימי 777 (Psalm 119), as it has **eight** Pasukim for each letter of the aleph bet.

Rather, it is because that Psalm (145) contains the Pasuk, "You open up Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."

If so, we should recite הלל הגדול (Psalm 136), as it includes the Pasuk "He gives bread to all living creatures.?"

Rather, the Psalm (145) is special **because it has both features.**

(Berachot46)

### **Basic understanding questions:**

1. According to the Gemara, what two factors make Ashrei special?
2. Why do you think an acrostic using all the letters of the alphabet makes a prayer special?

### **Analysis questions:**

**Topic 1:** Considering the main theme of Ashrei.

3. Does Ashrei celebrate specific historic miracles or does it celebrate the miracles of everyday life?
4. What prayers celebrate specific historic miracles?

**Topic 2:** Is Ashrei magical?

5. What do you think the Gemara means when it says that you are guaranteed a place in *Olam Haba* if you say Ashrei three times a day? Is Ashrei a magic formula, or does this statement need some extra explanation?

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<sup>2</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 15.

## *Humility and Wisdom*

Our Rabbis taught: "A person should always be humble like **Hillel** and not impatient like **Shammai**." There was a story in which two people made a bet with each other. They said, "Whoever goes and provokes Hillel to lose his temper shall receive four hundred zuz. Thereupon, one said to the other, "I will go and provoke him."

That day was Friday afternoon, and **Hillel** was washing his head in preparation for Shabbos. This man went and passed by the door of his house, and called out: "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" Hillel put on his cloak and went out to greet the person, and said to him: "My son, what do you seek?"

"I have a question to ask," the man said. "Ask, my son," Hillel responded. The man asked: "Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?" Hillel responded: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they do not have skillful midwives."

The man departed, waited a while, and then returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?" Hillel put on his cloak and went out to greet him, and said: "My son, what do you seek?"

"I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," Hillel responded. The man asked: "Why are the eyes of the Tadmurians especially round?" Hillel replied: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they live in sandy places."

The man departed, waited a while, and then returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?" Hillel put on his cloak and went out to greet him, and said "My son what do you seek?"

"I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," Hillel responded. The man asked: "Why are the feet of the Africans so wide?" Hillel replied: "My son, you have asked a great question. It is because they live in swamplands."

Hillel put on his cloak and the man then said: "I have many questions to ask but I fear that you may become angry," Hillel said: "Ask all the questions you have to ask."

"Are you the Hillel who is called the Nasi of The Jewish People?" "Yes," he replied. The man then said: "If that is you, I hope there are not many like you among the Jewish people." Hillel replied, "Why, my son, do you say such a thing?" "Because I have lost four hundred zuz on account of you," he answered.

Hillel responded, "One should always carefully guard his temperament so that he maintains calmness in all situations. "Hillel is worth your losing four hundred zuz and yet another four hundred zuz, but Hillel shall not lose his temper."

(Shabbat 30b—31a)

**Basic understanding questions:**

1. Most of us have heard this story before, so we won't break it down point by point.

**Analysis questions:**

2. What does it sound like the Gemara wants us to learn from this story(hint- read the Gemara's introduction)
3. How does this story portray that character trait in terms of Hillel?
4. How many **and which** of Hillel's positive character traits do you think this story demonstrates?
5. Why do you think Hillel answered the questions so patiently? Do you think he believed that they were honest enquiries?

## *The Miracle of Chanukah*

*What is Chanukah? The Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, there are the eight days of Hanukah, during which we do not eulogize or fast. When the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil in the Temple. When the Hasmonean (השמונאים) monarchy became strong and overcame them, they searched and could find only one jar of oil stamped with the seal of the kohen gadol. This jar contained only enough oil to last for one night, but a miracle happened and it lit for eight days. The next year, they established these days as holidays for praise and thanksgiving.*

*(Shabbat 21b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

1. **What** is the **date** of the Chanukah story? \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Who** controlled Eretz Yisrael at that time? \_\_\_\_\_
3. **Who** were the heroes of the Jews who fought off the enemy? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What supernatural miracle did Hashem perform for the Jews? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Minimizing Military Victories*

5. What famous part of the story does this part of the Gemara hardly refer to? (This isn't elaborated on at any other point in the Gemara either).
6. When we say the *Amidah* and *Birchas HaMazon* on *Chanukah* we add in *Al HaNissim*. What miracle is emphasized in this prayer, and which miracle is barely mentioned?
7. Why do the Rabbis of the Gemara only focus on the oil miracle while the *Al Hanissim* prayer focuses **mainly** on the military victory?

## *The Connection Between Redemption and Prayer<sup>3</sup>*

*The master said: "One should read Kerias Shema and then pray the Amida."*

*This supports R. Yochanan, for R. Yochanan said: "Who will merit the world-to-come (Olam haBa)? One who juxtaposes redemption [the blessing of לְגַאֲלָא יִשְׂרָאֵל] with the evening prayer.(Amida)" Berachot 4b)*

*R. Yochanan said: "The נְיָקִיָּו [pious people of old] would juxtapose redemption and prayer.*

*R. Yitzchak ben Elyakim testified in the name of the holy community of Jerusalem: "Whoever juxtaposes redemption and prayer will not be harmed for the entire day."*

*R. Zeira said: "But I juxtaposed and was harmed." He said to him: "How were you harmed? By the fact that you brought a myrtle branch to the king? There too, you must pay a tax to see the face of the king..."*

*Once, Rav Beruna juxtaposed redemption and prayer, and a smile did not leave his face for the entire day.*

*(Berachot 9b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

1. What two prayers does the Gemara say you should juxtapose?
2. By juxtaposing these two prayers, what blessing do you therefore say immediately before the Amidah?
3. How did juxtaposing these two prayers affect **Rav Beruna**?

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Redemption and Prayer*

4. Rabbi Yaakov Yechiel Weinberg (*Lifrakim*, p. 397) says that redemption and prayer correspond to the past and the present/future. Which one corresponds to which?
5. He asserts that focusing on only one of these issues is dangerous. What is the danger inherent in a person or community that only focuses on the past?
6. Conversely, what is the danger inherent in a person or community that only focuses on the future?
7. By putting these two themes together every day, what important lessons do we remind ourselves of?

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<sup>3</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 18.

## *Integration and the Tale of a Lifetime<sup>4</sup>*

*R. Illai said: "A man is known in three ways: by how he drinks (be'koso), how he is with his money (be'kiso), and in his anger (be'ka'aso)." And some say: Also in his play.*

*(Eruvin 65b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

8. According to this piece of Aggadeta, if you want to know what a person is really like you need to observe him/her in one of four situations. What are these four situations?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Seeing the real person*

9. Why do you think it is these particular situations bring out the 'real you!'

## *Order, Compassion, and the Moral Society<sup>5</sup>*

*The people of Sodom had beds for guests: if the guests were too tall, they were cut down to [the] size [of the bed]; if the guests were too short, they were stretched.*

*(Sanhedrin 109b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

10. How does this piece of Gemara describe the way the Sodomites treated their guests?

### **Analysis questions:**

Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel of blessed memory, a former chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, has an insight on this piece of Gemara that offers a very interesting insight.

11. First of all he says that there are two broad possible reasons why a society decides to look after its poorest members. What do you think these two reasons are?
12. What kind of society was Sodom following this analysis?
13. When charity is performed for the 'wrong' reason why can it end up in cruelty?
14. What kinds of societies have experienced this kind of charity and the unfortunate corresponding outcomes that we have associated with it?

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<sup>4</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 95.

## *The Proper Place for Praying: Of Windows and Valleys<sup>6</sup>*

*R. Chiyya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yohanan: "A person should only pray in a house with windows, as it says: And the windows of his upper chamber were open toward Jerusalem (Daniel 6:11)." Rav Kahana says: "A person who prays in a valley is brazen."*

*(Berachot 34b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

15. What does this piece of Gemara recommend?
16. Note: Although there is certainly an aggadic side to this Gemara, it is also straight forward law. This law is codified in the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 90:4-5.

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Redemption and Prayer*

17. Why do you think the rabbis recommend praying in a synagogue with windows that give you a view of the outside world?
18. Rabbi Yitzchak Blau suggests that praying in a room with windows will make sure that we focus on the outside world as well as our own world. Why do you think this is something that a praying individual needs to be reminded of?



## *The Sabbath, Myrtle Branches, and the Common Man<sup>7</sup>*

*[This story begins with R. Shimon bar Yohai fleeing a Roman death sentence together with his son R. Eleazar.] So they went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred, and a carob tree and a well were created for them. They would remove their garments and sit up to their necks in sand. The whole day they studied. When it was time for prayers, they robed, covered themselves, prayed, and then took off their garments again, so that they would not wear out. Thus they dwelled twelve years in the cave.*

*Then Elyahu came and stood at the entrance to the cave and exclaimed: "Who will inform the son of Bar Yohai that the emperor is dead and his decree is annulled?"*

*So they emerged. Seeing a man plowing and sowing, they exclaimed: "They forsake eternal life and engage in temporal life."*

*Whatever they looked upon was immediately burned up. Thereupon a heavenly voice came forth and cried out: "Have you emerged to destroy My world. Return to your cave."*

*They returned and dwelled there for twelve months, saying that the punishment for the wicked in Gehenom is twelve months. A heavenly voice then came forth and said: "Go out from your cave."*

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<sup>6</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 28-29.

*Thus they went out. Wherever R. Eleazar wounded, R. Shimon healed. He said to him: "My son, you and I are sufficient for the entire world."  
 On Friday night just before sunset, they saw an old man holding two myrtle branches. They asked him: "What are these for?"  
 He replied: "They are in honor of the Sabbath."  
 "But is not one enough?"  
 "One is for zachor and one is for shamor."  
 He said to his son: "See how precious the commandments are to Israel."  
 Their minds were then set at ease.*

*(Shabbat 33b)*

**Basic understanding questions:**

19. At the beginning of this story we find R' Shimon bar Yochai and his son R' Eliezer on the run. Who were they fleeing? Why?
20. They hid in a cave. How did they have food and water to survive?
21. How did they spend their days?
22. How long did they spend in the cave?
23. How did they know when it was safe to leave?
24. What did they say when they saw a man working his field?
25. What happened when they looked at things?
26. What were they told to do?
27. Twelve months later they were instructed to leave once again. Recount the conversation they had with a man on a Friday afternoon soon after they left the cave.
28. How did they react to this conversation?

**Analysis questions:**

*Relating to the non-scholarly*

29. Why were R' Shimon bar Yochai and his son pleased after the second conversation with a man who was not involved in worship or Torah study when they had been upset with the first man?
30. How do you think this incident changed their understanding of what Hashem wants from man?
31. How did they interpret the man working in the field in the first story, and how did they interpret the working man with the myrtle branches in the second story?
32. What lesson does this story offer the Torah scholar in the way that they need to relate to the working class?
33. Why do you think the man in this Gemara story was carrying a myrtle? Is there something specific about the myrtle that makes it appropriate for this story? (Think about the kind of person the Midrashic says *Aravah* (myrtle) that is taken with the *Lulav* on *Sukkot* corresponds to).

## *Accusing Achashverosh and the Nature of the Purim Salvation*<sup>8</sup>

*And Esther said: The adversary and the enemy is this wicked Haman (Esther 7:6). R. Elazar said: "This teaches us that she was pointing toward Achashverosh and an angel came and moved her hand toward Haman."*

*(Megilla 16a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

34. The Gemara focuses on a small part of the Esther story. What part of the story does the quotation come from?
35. What does Esther actually say?
36. According to the Aggada, what did she really want to say?
37. According to the Aggada, what prevented her from saying what she really wanted to?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Esther nearly attacks Achashverosh!*

Introduction: We are not going to focus on the textual basis for making this clearly non-literal Midrashic statement, but the commentators do discuss this. Rather, we are going to focus on the implications of this Aggada.

38. Clearly, the author of the Aggada had reason to believe that Esther was upset with Achashverosh. Why do you think she was upset?
39. The Vilna Gaon says that this Midrash is like a Freudian slip (although he doesn't use that term). What is a Freudian slip? How does this help us explain this Aggada?

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<sup>8</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 39.

## *The Roots of Disrespect<sup>9</sup>*

*It is told that R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students from Gabbat to Antipatris, and they all perished during the same brief period because they did not act respectfully toward one another. The world was then desolate until R. Akiva came to our Rabbis in the South and taught them — R. Meir, R. Yehuda, R. Yossi, R. Shimon, and R. Elazar ben Shamua — and they sustained Torah at that time. It was taught: “They all died between Pesach and Shavuot.” R. Chama bar Abba, and some say R. Chiyya bar Avin, said: “They all died a harsh death.” What was it? R. Nachman said: “Croup”*

*(Yevamot 62b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

40. The Gemara discusses the death of whose students?
41. Why did they die?
42. During what part of the calendar year did they die?
43. *What do we do in the calendar year to commemorate these deaths?*

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Extremism in Religious Observance can be Destructive*

We have to assume that Rabbi Akiva did a good job of teaching about appropriate behavior to each other, so how did they come to err to such a degree that there was a massive plague? We are going to consider (at least) two different answers. However, although they are completely unrelated answers they both share one common theme; they both suggest that sometimes even the best religious ideals, when taken too an extreme can be dangerous and self-defeating!

#### **Approach 1 – The Shem MiShmuel: Extreme Unity threatens the respect of the individual.**

44. R' Shmuel Borenstein suggests that Rabbi Akiva was actually successful in teaching the concepts of unity and unselfishness to his students, but they took it too far, and that led to disrespect for each other. How can extreme unity lead to disrespect for one another?
45. Can you think of a historical example, where a movement that was supposed to lead to collective unity, led to complete disrespect for the rights and lives of many individuals?

#### **Approach 2 – Rabbi Chazkel Levenstein:**

46. R' Chazkel starts off by noting that there should always be a difference in the way we apply ideal to ourselves and to others. For example, what would be an appropriate use of the concept of faith in our lives that would be inappropriate if applied to someone else?
47. R' Chazkel explains that R' Akiva would teach his students to flee from honor. How would this be appropriately applied to oneself? Why might it lead to inappropriate behavior if applied in equal measure to our friends?

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<sup>9</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 41.

## ***Torah-Only and Having a God<sup>10</sup>***

When R. Elazar ben Parta and R. Chanina ben Teradyon were captured, R. Elazar said to R. Hahina: "You are fortunate, because you were captured for one offense. Woe is me, for I was captured for five offenses."

R. Chanina said to him: "You are fortunate, because you were captured for five offenses and you will be saved. Woe is me, who was captured for one offense, and I will not be saved. For you engaged in Torah and gemilus chassadim [acts of compassion], and I was only involved in Torah."

It is as Rav Huna taught. R. Huna said: "Whoever is only involved in Torah, it is as if he has no God, as it says: And there were many days in Israel without a true God (II Divrei haYamim 15:3). What does the Pasuk mean when it says without a true God? That anyone who involves himself only with Torah is compared to someone without a God."

(Avoda Zara 17b)

### **Basic understanding questions:**

48. Rav Elazar ben Parta and Rav Chanina ben Teradyon were captured by the Romans. They were imprisoned for offenses against the law. Their offenses included things like studying Torah, Teaching Torah and keeping Mitzvos.
49. Why did Rav Elazar think he was in a worse situation?
50. How did Rav Chanina explain his assessment that he was less deserving of Divine assistance?
51. Rav Huna makes a very powerful statement. What does he assert?

### **Analysis questions:**

52. While we can easily understand that a person who does not have acts of compassion is incomplete in his religious observance, how can Rav Huna say that a person without acts of compassion is like a person *who has not God*? How can we understand this statement?
53. What practical conclusion can we take from this piece of Aggada?

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<sup>10</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 87-88.

## *Circles of Ethical Responsibility*<sup>11</sup>

Kohelet 12:14 states, “For every action God shall bring to judgment, on every hidden thing, whether good or evil.” The following aggada comments on this Pasuk:

*What does whether good or evil mean?*

*It was taught in the house of R. Yannai: “This refers to a person who gives charity to a poor person in public.’ In this vein, R. Yannai once saw a fellow giving a coin to a poor person in public; he said to [the donor]: “Better that you should not give him anything at all than that you should give to him and embarrass him:’*

*In the house of R. Shila, they taught: “This refers to a person who gives charity to a woman in private, because he brings her under suspicion:’*

*Rava said: “This refers to the person who sends his wife uncut meat [from which the non-kosher parts have not been removed] on Friday.’ But did not Rava send [such meat to his own wife, R. Hisda’s daughter]? The daughter of R. Hisda is different, because her expertise is established.*

*...Shemuel said: “This refers to the person who causes money to be found for a poor person at the time of his distress.”*

*(Chagiga 5a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

54. The Gemara offers a Midrashic explanation of “*whether good or evil.*” The Gemara says that it refer to deeds that are a *combination* of good and evil?
55. **Example 1:** What example does R’ Yannai give of this phenomenon?
56. According to R’ Yannai, what is better than giving charity in public?
57. **Example 2:** What example does R’ Shila suggest?
58. **Example 3:** What is Rava’s illustration of this idea?
59. **Example 4:** What is the instance that Shmuel suggests?

### **Analysis questions:**

60. How do you understand Shmuel’s statement. How can it be bad to give a needy person money? What is the alternative?
61. What practical conclusion can we take from this Gemara?

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<sup>11</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 91-92.

## *Limitations on Lying*<sup>12</sup>

*Rav was annoyed by his wife. If he asked her to make lentils, she made peas. If he asked her to make peas, she made lentils. When his son Chiyya got older, he [Chiyya] would reverse the request [and then his mother would make what the father wanted].*

*Rav said to his son: "Things are going better with your mother."*

*Chiyya said: "I am reversing it for her."*

*Rav said: "This is what people say [a Gemara expression for a popular adage]: 'The one who comes from you teaches you good sense.' You should not do this, as the Pasuk says: They have taught their tongue to speak lies and weary themselves to commit iniquity (Yirmiyahu 9:5)."*

*(Yevamot 63a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

62. Why was Rav annoyed with his wife?
63. How did Rav Chiyya, his son, try to resolve the issue?
64. What was Rav's initial reaction to his son when he found out what he had done?
65. What was his main advice to his son?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Issue 1: Effective Rebuke.*

66. Why do you think Rav praised his son, when he intended to tell him to change his behavior in the next sentence?

*Issue 2: Lying for the Sake of Peace. When is it permissible?*

67. Many of the commentators note that the Gemara tells us elsewhere (Yevamos 65b) that it is permitted to lie in order to maintain the peace between people. In that case why wasn't Rav Chiyya justified in his actions, and why did Rav tell him to stop? In what way do you think this situation was different, and therefore the usual exemption did not apply?
68. What practical conclusion can we take from our discussion about the Torah's approach to truth, and when lying is permissible?

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<sup>12</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 129.

## *The Problem of Profanity*<sup>13</sup>

*R. Chana the son of Rav said: "Everyone knows why a bride enters a bridal chamber, but whoever disgraces his mouth and utters a word of folly — even if a decree of seventy years of happiness were sealed and granted unto him, it is turned for him into evil."*

*(Ketuvot 86)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

69. Rav Chana makes reference to a specific situation. What general rule is he laying out?

### **Analysis questions:**

70. Look carefully at the words of Rav Chana. Does he imply that the problem with inappropriate speech is the effect it will have on the listener or what it reveals about the speaker?

71. Why is Rav Chana so concerned about inappropriate speech? Do the words that come out of our mouth really affect anyone, if they are not harmful to another person? What does this kind of language reveal about the speaker?



## *Authority, Heavenly Voices, and the Interpretation of Torah*<sup>14</sup>

*It was taught there: "If you cut it [an earthenware oven] into sections and put sand between the sections, R. Eliezer says it is pure, and the sages say it is impure. And this is the oven of Achinai." What is Achinai? R. Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: "They surrounded him with words like an achina [snake] and made it impure.' It was taught: "On that day, R. Eliezer responded to them with all the arguments in the world and they did not accept them from him:'*

*He said to them: "If I am right, this carob tree will prove it." The carob tree was uprooted from its place and moved one hundred cubits; some say, four hundred cubits.*

*They said to him: "We do not bring proofs from carob trees."*

*He said to them: "If I am right, this stream of water will prove it.' The stream started to flow backwards.*

*They said to him: "We do not bring proof from streams."*

*He said to them: "If I am right, the walls of the study hall will prove it." The walls of the study hall inclined to fall.*

*R. Yehoshua rebuked them [the walls]. He said to them: "If Gemara scholars contest one another in matters of Halacha, why does this concern you?" They did not fall, out of respect for*

<sup>13</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 167-168.

*R. Yehoshua, but they did not straighten, out of respect for R. Eliezer, and they are still inclined there.*

*He said to them: "If the halacha is as I say, let it be proved from the heavens: 'A heavenly voice came forth and proclaimed: "Why are you contesting R. Eliezer, when Halacha follows him in every area?"*

*R. Yehoshua arose and said: "It is not in heaven (Devarim 30:12):' What does this mean? R. Yirmiyah said: "The Torah has already been give at Sinai. We pay no heed to heavenly voices, since it has already been written in the Torah at Sinai, follow the majority (Shemot 23:2).*

*R. Natan came upon Eliyahu. He said to him: "What is the Holy One, blessed be He, doing at this time?"*

*Eliyahu said to him: "He is laughing and saying, 'My children have defeated Me; My children have defeated Me."*

*(Bava Metzia 59a-59b)*

**Basic understanding questions:**

72. What were the Rabbis arguing over? What were the two opinions?

73. What were the 4 miracles that R' Eliezer asked for to prove his case? How did the Rabbis respond after each miracle?

**Analysis questions:**

74. The most famous answer was the one that the Rabbis responded after the Heavenly voice, "It is not in heaven!"

75. What does this piece of Aggadeta tell us about the way halacha works?

76. What is the most important factors in reaching a halachic decision? What factors are not as important?

## ***Rabbi Eliezer's Excommunication<sup>15</sup>***

*This section analyzes the next part of the Gemara narrative presented in the preceding section.*

*It was taught: On that day, they brought all the taharos that R. Eliezer had ruled pure and they burned them in fire, and they voted and excommunicated R. Eliezer. They said: "Who will go and inform him?"*

*R. Akiva said: "I will go, lest the wrong person go and inform him in a way that destroys the world."*

*What did R. Akiva do? He wore black and wrapped himself in black and sat at a distance of four meters from R. Eliezer.*

*R. Eliezer said to him: "R. Akiva, why is today different from other days?"*

*He answered: "Rebbe, It seems to me that your colleagues are separating from you."*

*He [R. Eliezer] also tore his garment, removed his shoes and sat upon the ground. Tears poured from his eyes....*

*It was taught: There was great anger in the world on that day, and everywhere where R. Eliezer turned his eye was burned. R. Gamliel was traveling on a boat and a wave threatened to sink the boat. He said: "It seems to me that this is only because of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus' He stood up and said: "Master of the universe! It is revealed and known before You that I did not do this for my own honor or for the honor of my father's house, but for Your honor, so that disputes will not proliferate in Israel!" The sea calmed from its anger.*

*Ima Shalom, R. Eliezer's wife, was the sister of R. Gamliel. From the time of this episode, she would not allow her husband to fall on his face [while reciting Tahanun]. One Rosh Chodesh day, she became confused as to whether the previous month was full [30 days] or not full [29 days]. Some say that a pauper came to the door and she brought him bread. She found R. Eliezer fallen on his face [in prayer]. She said: "Arise, for you have killed my brother." Meanwhile, a voice came from the house of R. Gamliel that he had died.*

*R. Eliezer said to her: "How did you know [that this would happen]?"*

*She said: "I have a tradition from my grandfather's house that all gates are closed except for the gate of ona'ah [verbal abuse]."*

*(Bava Metzia 59b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

77. R' Eliezer refused the ruling of the majority. What two things did the Rabbis do as a result?
78. What was their motive in taken these drastic actions?
79. Who went to inform him of the excommunication?
80. Describe how R' Akiva decided to break the news. Why do you think he chose this approach?
81. What happened to R' Gamliel on that day? How did R' Gamliel resolve this problem?
82. What did R' Eliezer's wife stop him doing from that day onwards? Why?
83. Why did she forget to stop him one day?

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<sup>15</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 171-172.

84. What happened on that day?

**Analysis questions:**

*Who was right?*

85. A question which has no simple answer is 'Who was right?' There seem to be two indications in the story that Hashem took the side of the Rabbis, and two indications that He took the side of R' Eliezer. Can you find these four indicators in the story?
86. How do you explain this? Is it possible that they were both right in different way, or in different aspects of the whole story?
87. Is it possible that there are sometimes right decisions which inevitably include wrong parts to them too?



### *Youthful Exuberance and the Wisdom of Experience*<sup>16</sup>

*What appeared on the coin of Avraham Avinu? An elderly man and woman on one side, and a young boy and girl on the other.*

*(Bava Kama 97b)*

#### **Analysis questions:**

*Who was right?*

88. It is obvious that this Gemara is not referring to a real coin, but to something symbolic of Avraham's achievements.
89. Coinage is something that is usually established by a county or a kingdom. Avraham did not have a kingdom in the usual meaning of the word, but what kind of kingdom did he establish?
90. The opposite sides of the coin seem to depict opposites. How can they both refer to Avraham and Sarah?
91. What real-life conclusions can we take from this piece of Gemara?

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<sup>16</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, p. 193.

## *A Change of Environment and a Change of Heart*<sup>17</sup>

R. Mani was frequently found before R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv. Once, R. Mani said to him: "The rich members of my father-in-law's household harass me"

R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv said: "Let them become poor;' and they became poor.

After a while, R. Mani came back and said: "They now press me to support them~"

R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv said: "Let them become rich again," and they became rich again.

R. Mani said: "The people of my household are not [i.e. my wife is not] satisfactory to me." R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv said: "What is her name?" R. Mani answered: "Hanna." R. Yitzchak decreed: "Let Hanna become beautiful;' and she became beautiful.

R. Mani returned and said: "She has become overbearing to me." R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv said: "Let Hanna revert to her plainness," and she reverted to her plainness.

There were two students before R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv. They said to him: "Let the master ask for mercy for us so that we will become very wise." He said to them: "It [the power to affect things by praying] was with me, but I sent it away."

(Ta'anis 23b)

### **Basic understanding questions:**

92. What four things did Rav Mani ask R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv to pray for on his behalf?
93. What did Rav Mani ask for a period of time after each request was granted?
  
94. What did two other students ask R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv to pray for on their behalf?
95. How did R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv respond to this request?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Seeing the real person*

96. What did Rav Mani hope that each of his requests would achieve?
97. What do we hope Rav Mani realized after these incidents?
98. In the final piece of this story it reports how two asked R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv to pray for on their behalf for wisdom. Does the Rabbi's response imply that the power of prayer had been withdrawn from him, or that he had decided to 'send it away'?
99. *Maharsha* notes that the language of the Gemara implies that he decided not to pray for them. What do you think was R. Yitzchak ben Elyashiv's rationale for this decision?

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<sup>17</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 219-220.

## *Can We Kill the Evil Inclination?*<sup>18</sup>

*And they cried out with a great voice to the Lord, God (Nehemya 9:4). What did they say? Said Rav - some say, R. Yohanan - "Woe, woe. It is the [inclination for idolatry] that destroyed the Temple, burned the Sanctuary, killed all the righteous, and exiled Israel from our land, and it is still dancing among us. Was it given to us for any reason other than to receive reward [for resisting it]? We want neither it nor the reward."*

*A note fell from heaven, upon which was written: "Truth." Rav Chanina said: "From here we can derive that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth."*

*They sat fasting for three days and three nights, and it was handed over to them. It departed from the Holy of Holies as a fiery lion-cub. The prophet.[Zecharya] said to Israel: "This is the inclination for idolatry, as it is written: And he said: 'This is the wickedness' (Zecharya 5:8)."*

*As they grabbed hold of it, one of its hairs fell out; it raised its voice and the sound carried four hundred parasangs [1,400 miles].*

*They said: "What should we do? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven."*

*The prophet said to them: "Cast it into a pot of lead and close its opening with lead — for lead muffles the sound, as it is written: And he said: 'This is the wickedness.' And he cast it down into the basket, and he cast the lead weight upon its opening (Zecharya 5:8)."*

*They said: "Since this is a time of grace, let us ask for mercy regarding the inclination for [sexual] sins." They asked for mercy, and it was handed over to them.*

*It said to them: "Realize that if you kill me, the world will be finished."*

*They imprisoned it for three days, but when they then looked in the entire land of Israel for a fresh egg, they could not find one.*

*They said: "What should we do? Should we kill it? The world will be finished. Should we ask for mercy on a portion? They do not grant halves in heaven."*

*They blinded its eyes and let it go. This helped, in that people are no longer tempted by their relatives.*

*(Yoma 69b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

100. This piece of Gemara begins with a Pasuk from the book of Nechmya in which the Jews are crying out to Hashem. According to the Gemara what were they praying for?
101. What was the response from Heaven? How did they get the response?
102. What did they then need to do to get their hands on 'it'? What form did this specific evil inclination take?
103. What did they do with this animal? How did they succeed in killing it?
104. After dealing with this *yetzer hara*, what did the Rabbis then set their eyes upon?
105. They prayed, and got their request. What did this *yetzer hara* warn them?
106. What could they not find in the whole of Israel after three days of imprisoning it?
107. What did they decide to do to it? What effect did this have?

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<sup>18</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 221-222.

## Analysis questions:

### *Dealing with improper desires*

108. This piece of Aggadata has a corresponding historical reality. The Jewish People were beset with problems of idol worship throughout the period of the first Bet HaMikdash, but these were no longer after the Jews returned to Israel with Nechemyah. However, some of the commentaries note that this period also sees the end of prophecy too. Why do you think Hashem caused prophecy to stop at the same time as the desire for idol-worship stopped?
109. What do you think is symbolized by the hair that fell out from the beast before it was burnt?
110. What conclusion do you think we can take from this Gemara about the way we need to approach our control of the evil desire? Bring a proof to your answer from the story.



### ***Choni Demands Rain***<sup>19</sup>

*Once it happened that the greater part of Adar had passed and yet no rain had fallen. The people sent a message to Choni the Circle Drawer, "Pray for rain to fall." He prayed and no rain fell. He thereupon drew a circle and stood within it...*

*He exclaimed" Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me because [they believe] me to be a member of Your house. I swear by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy on your children."*

*Rain began to drip. His students said to him: "Rabbi, we look to you to save us from death. We think that this rain came only to release you from your oath."*

*He said before Him: "I did not request this but rather rain that fills the wells, cisterns, and caves."*

*The rain began to come down with great force, every drop being as big as the opening of a barrel... The students said: "Rabbi, we look to you to save us from death. We think that this rain comes only to destroy the world."*

*He said before Him: "I did not request this but rain of blessing and bounty." Then rain fell normally until the people had to go up to the Temple Mount because of the rain....*

*Shimon ben Shetah sent to him: "If you were not Choni, I would have placed you under the ban; for were the years like the years of Eliyahu, in whose hands were the keys of rain, would not the name of heaven be profaned through you? But what can I do, for you act petulantly before God and He grants your desire."*

*R. Yohanan said: "This righteous man [Honi] was troubled all his days by the Pasuk A song of ascents, when God brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers (Tehillim 126a)' He said: "Is it possible for a person to sleep for seventy years?"*

*One day he [Honi] was journeying on a road and saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him: "How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?" He said: "seventy years."*

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<sup>19</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 225-226.

*He [Choni] said: "Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?"*

*He said: "I found carob trees in the world. Just as my forefathers planted for me, I plant for my children."*

*Choni sat down to have a meal and sleep overtook him. While he was sleeping, a rock formation enclosed around him and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering fruit from the carob tree. He asked him: "Are you the man who planted the tree?"*

*He said: "I am his grandson."...*

*[Choni returns to his house, but they do not believe his claim to be Choni.] He went to the study hall. He heard the Rabbis saying: "The law is as clear as in the days of Choni the Circle Drawer, because when he came to the study hall, he would solve all the rabbis' difficulties."*

*He said to them: "I am he." They did not believe him and did not honor him as he deserved. He became depressed. They asked for mercy and he passed away.*

*Rava said: "It is as people say: Either companionship or death."*

*(Ta'anit 23a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

111. In this story we find the Jewish people desperate for rain. It was Adar, and there hadn't been any rainfall. To put this in perspective, at what point in the year do we begin praying for rain? How many months had they therefore been waiting?
112. How did Rabbi Choni pray for the rain?
113. What happened when the rain got too heavy?
114. How did Rabbi Choni become affectionately known as a result of this story?
115. How did Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah react to Rabbi Choni after this story? What seems to have been Shimon ben Shetach's main concern?
116. In the second story, we are told about a Pasuk that troubled Rabbi Choni? What was his issue with Jewish People's situation after the first Bet HaMikdash?
117. How did Rabbi Choni come to understand a solution to this problem?
118. What happened to Rabbi Choni at the end of the story?
119. At the end of the story Choni dies after being depressed. How did Rava explain his death?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Dealing with improper desires*

120. Some of the commentators (e.g. Maharsha) understand that the only problem Shimon ben Shetach had with Choni's actions was that he could have come to utter the name of Hashem. Other commentators (e.g. Rashi) understand that there were other concerns. What else do you think might have concerned Shimon ben Shetach?<sup>20</sup>
121. What do you think these stories suggest about Choni's personality?
122. Lots of questions still remain in this story. What do you make of the ending, and Choni's depression and death? Can we attempt to explain this ending to a glorious Rabbi's life? Are there any other connections between the two stories?

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<sup>20</sup> see also Berachot 19a

## *The First Day of Hillel's Career*<sup>21</sup>

Our Rabbis taught: This halacha was forgotten by the sons of Beteira [the family of the patriarchs of the supreme rabbinical court]. One time, the fourteenth of Nissan fell on a Shabbat. They forgot whether or not the service of the Pesach offering overrides the Shabbat. They said: "Does anyone know if Pesach overrides Shabbat?"

They said to them: "A man came up from Babylon by the name of Hillel haBavli. He attended upon the great sages of our generation, Shemaya and Avtalyon, and he knows if Pesach overrides Shabbat"

They sent for him and asked him: "Do you know if Pesach overrides the Shabbat?"

He said to them: "Does only one Pesach offering a year override Shabbat? Is it not the case that more than two hundred Pesach[-like] offerings a year override the Shabbat?"... They immediately sat him at the head and appointed him to be the patriarch. He expounded the laws of Pesach all day. He began to vex them with words. He said to them: "What happened to you, that I came up from Babylon and became the patriarch? Your laziness, that you did not attend upon the great sages of our generation, Shemaya and Avtalyon."

They said to him: "Rebbe, if one forgets to bring the knife [for the paschal offering] on Friday, what is the law?"

He said to them: "This halacha I heard and forgot. Rather, let the Jewish people be. If they are not prophets, they are the children of prophets."

The next day, those whose Pesach offering was a sheep inserted the knife in the wool. Those whose Pesach offering was a kid inserted the knife between the horns. Hillel saw the deed and remembered the law. He said: "This is as I received from Shemaya and Avtalyon."

(Pesachim 66a)

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: "If a scholar acts arrogantly, his wisdom departs from him..." From where do we know this? From Hillel.

(Pesachim 66b)

### **Basic understanding questions:**

123. What halachic question was bothering the sons of Beteira?
124. Who answered their question? What else did he say to them?
125. What was the next halachic question that the sons of Beteira were unsure about?
126. How did Hillel respond this time? Who did remember the answer to this question?
127. How did Rav Yehudah explain this sequence of events?

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Humility and wisdom*

128. What character traits normally come to mind when we think of Hillel?
129. Do his actions in the first part of this story surprise you?
130. Why do you think Hillel decided to take such a harsh approach with the sons of Beteira?

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<sup>21</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 233-234.

131. In the end was he correct in this assessment, or was it a mistake?
132. According to Rav Yehudah, Hillel's wisdom temporarily diminished as a result of his temporary 'arrogance.' Why do you think arrogance leads to a decline in wisdom?
133. It is obvious from this story that Hillel had some setbacks in his character development before he reached his famous levels of humility and patience. What lessons and encouragement can we take from this story?
134. By inserting this story into the Gemara, what might it be telling us about the way we should remember great people after their death?

*Everyone talks about, is amazed by, and places on a pedestal the purity of speech of the Chafetz Chaim, of blessed memory. But who knows about battles, struggles, stumbles, losses, and retreats that the Chafetz Chaim experienced along the path of his war with his evil inclination.*

*(Pachad Yitzchak, Igrot, p. 217)*

## *Leadership, Heroism, and Public Positions*<sup>22</sup>

*[Our story begins with R. Yehuda haNasi, known as Rabbi, on his deathbed.] He said to them: "I need the sages of Israel." The sages of Israel entered: He said to them: "Do not eulogize me in the cities, and make a yeshiva after thirty days have passed. Shimon my son will be the chacham, Gamliel my son will be the nasi, and Chanina bar Chama will sit at the head [of the yeshiva]."*

*But wasn't there R. Chiyya [who was worthy to become rosh yeshiva]?... R. Chiyya [who outlived Rabbi] was involved in mitzvot and Rabbi did not want to stop his work. This as we have learned that when R. Chanina and R. Chiyya were arguing, R. Chanina said: "You are quarreling with me. If, God forbid, Torah was ever forgotten in Israel, I could restore it with my reasoning." R. Chiyya said to him, "I make it so that Torah is not forgotten in Israel because I bring flax and plant it and make nets and trap deer. I feed the meat to orphans, and I make parchment from the deerskin and go to a town that has no teacher of children. I write the five books of Chumash for five children, and I teach the six orders of Mishna to six children, and I tell each child to teach his part to the others." This is what Rabbi meant when he said: "How great are the deeds of Chiyya."*

*(Kesuvos 103a-103b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

135. Who is on his deathbed at the beginning of this story?
136. What was Rabbi Yerhudah HaNasi's most famous accomplishment?
137. How did Rabbi Yehudah divide out his responsibilities before he died?
138. About whom did the Gemara express surprise about the fact that he had not been offered one of these positions?
139. How did the Gemara defend Rabbi Yehudah's decision not to include Rabbi Chiyya among these important positions?
140. What did Rav Chiyya do that made his own job so important?

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Humility and wisdom*

141. Why do you think Rav Yehudah didn't plan for Rav Chiyya to fulfill his current role and a new role too?
142. What does this piece of Gemara imply about the way the Rabbis of the Gemara valued school teachers?
143. What is especially impressive about Rav Chiyya's efforts?
144. Why do you think Rav Chiyya went to such lengths to do his job?

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<sup>22</sup> Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine, pp. 245-246.

## *Harmony*<sup>23</sup>

*You find that the Holy One, blessed be he, created heaven and earth with wisdom.*

*Rabbi Azariah said in the name of Resh Lakish:*

*On the first day He created heaven and earth.*

*Five days were left: one day he created something on high, and something below, the next.*

*He created the firmament on high on the second day; on the third “Let the waters . . . be gathered together” below.*

*On the fourth day “Let there be lights” on high; on the fifth “Let the waters swarm” below.*

*Only the sixth day was left for something to be created on it.*

*The Holy One, blessed be he, said:*

*If I create something on high, the earth will be angry.*

*If I create something below, heaven will be angry.*

*What was it the Holy One, blessed be he, did?*

*He created man from that which is below, and the soul from that which is on high.*

*Say: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth” (Mishlei 3:19).*

*(Tanchuma, Bereishit 9:9, Yoma 69b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

145. What interesting pattern does the Midrash note?
146. According to the Midrash, what was Hashem’s quandary on Friday?
147. How did Hashem solve this problem whilst keeping everybody happy?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Human beings: Synthesis of body and soul*

148. What do you think was the main message that the author of this Midrash wanted to convey?
149. What does this Midrash suggest about the Jewish position on the question of whether there is a difference between humans and animals?

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<sup>23</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 10.

## *If not for the will to evil<sup>24</sup>*

*“And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Bereishit 1:31).*

*Rav Nachman said in the name of Rav Shmuel:*

*“Behold, it was very good” — that is the will to evil.*

*But is the will to evil good? That is astonishing!*

*Yet were it not for the will to evil, men would not build homes, or take wives, or propagate, or engage in business,*

*And Shlomo [haMelech] said the same:*

*“I considered all labor and all excelling in work, that it is a man’s rivalry with his neighbor.”*

*(Kohelet 4:4).*

*... They said:*

*This being a time of good will, let us pray and ask for the will to evil.*

*They prayed and the will to evil was delivered to them.*

*The prophet said to them:*

*Know, if you destroy this one, the world will come to an end.*

*They imprisoned it for three days:*

*Then they sought a new-laid egg in all the land of Israel, and not one could be found.*

*(Bereishis Rabbah 9:9, Yoma 69b)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

150. This piece of Gemara begins with a Pasuk from the end of the Creation story. Which words in this Pasuk does the Gemara focus on?
151. What does the Gemara comment on the words “very good” in the name of Rav Shmuel?
152. How can “very good” mean “evil”?
153. Do you think the Gemara is calling these activities outright evil, or that the author of the Aggadata is focusing on certain elements in these activities? In what way can these activities be considered evil?
154. What type of evil were the Rabbis talking about in the second piece of Gemara? Why is it also good?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Is good and evil always black and white?*

155. What interesting perspective does this piece of Gemara give us on the complicated nature of good and evil?
156. Can we ever say that something is absolutely evil? Is this piece of Gemara advocating a completely non-judgmental approach to good and evil?
157. Try to name some *absolute* evils.

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<sup>24</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 15-16.

### ***The Gates***<sup>25</sup>

*There is no creature the Holy One, blessed be He, rejects, but He accepts them all.*

*The gates are open at every hour, and all who wish to enter, may enter.*

*Therefore it is said: "My doors I opened to the wanderer" (Job 31:32) - meaning the Holy One, blessed be He, who tolerates his creatures.*

*(Shemot Rabbah 19:4)*

#### **Analysis questions:**

*Every person has their time.*

158. What is the main message of this short piece of Midrash?

159. Can you think of any examples where we see the truth of this Midrash in Biblical or Gemaraic stories?



### ***The Watchmen***<sup>26</sup>

*Rabbi Yehudah the Prince sent Rabbi Dosa and Rabbi Ami to travel to all the cities in the land of Israel and to inspect them.*

*They came to one city and said to the people:*

*Let the watchmen of the city come here.*

*They brought out the chief of the city guard and the sheriff.*

*The rabbis said to them:*

*Are these the watchmen of the city? They are the destroyers of the city!*

*They said to them:*

*And who are the watchmen of the city?*

*They said to them:*

*They are the teachers of the Written Law and the teachers of the Oral Law, for they watch day and night; in keeping with the words: "Thou shall meditate about it (the Torah) day and night" (Yehoshua, 1:8).*

*(Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 120b)*

#### **Basic understanding questions:**

160. What job had Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi given Rabbi Dosa and Rabbi Ami?

161. What was the main thing they taught the people of the city?

#### **Analysis questions:**

*The guardians of the city*

162. At the beginning of the story it does not say what exactly Rabbi Dosa and Rabbis action we supposed to inspect cities for. Does it become clearer by the end of the story what exactly their role was?

163. What was the prevailing approach to education in the world in the time of the Mishnah?

164. What does this Aggada tell you about the Jewish approach to education already 2000 years ago?

<sup>25</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 54-55.b

165. Where do we see the Jewish emphasis on education in our most famous daily prayers?

***The Law and More***<sup>27</sup> -

*It happened to Rabbah bar Bar Chanan that some porters broke a barrel of his wine.*

*He took away their cloaks.*

*They went and told Rav.*

*He said to him: Give them back their cloaks.*

*He said to him: Is that the law?*

*He said to him: Yes: "That thou may walk in the way of good men" (Mishlei 2:20).*

*He gave them back their cloaks.*

*They said to Rav: We are poor men, and have worked all day, and are in need, and have nothing.*

*He said to him: Go and pay them.*

*He said to him: Is that the law?*

*He said to him: Yes: "And keep the paths of the righteous" (ibid.).*

*(Bava Metzia 83a)*

**Basic understanding questions:**

166. What happened to Rabbah bar Bar Chanan on one occasion?

167. What two things did he withhold from the porters?

168. What did Rav say to Rabbah bar Bar Chanan when the porters complained about these two issues?

**Analysis questions:**

*Beyond the letter of the law*

169. Was Rav giving Rabbah bar Bar Chanan a legal ruling or advice?

170. According to the strict letter of the law was Rabbah bar Bar Chanan justified in either of his two actions?

171. What lesson can we take from this Gemara?

172. What do you think are the limits to this type of approach? What problems might arise if this approach was taken by everyone the whole time?

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<sup>27</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 57.

## ***Fathers and Children***<sup>28</sup>

*When the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moshe:*

*“... visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children” (Shemot 20:5),*

*Moshe said:*

*Many are the wicked who have begotten righteous children;*

*shall they take the consequences of their fathers' iniquities?*

*Terach served images, and Avraham his son was righteous,*

*the same with Hezekiah who was righteous, and Ahaz his father wicked,*

*the same with Josiah who was righteous, and Amon his father wicked.*

*Is it right then that the righteous be struck down for the iniquity of their fathers?*

*The Holy One, blessed be he, said:*

*By your life, I am voiding my words and fulfilling yours.*

*As it is said: “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers” (Deut.24: 16).*

*And, by your life, I am writing them down in your name, as it is said: “According to that which is written in the book of the law of Moshe” (II Kings 14:6).*

*(Bamidbar Rabbah 19:33)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

173. What Pasuk in Parshas Yisro is this Midrash focused on?
174. According to the Midrash what was Moshe protesting about to Hashem?
175. Name one of the historical stories that Moshe points to in making his argument.
176. How did Hashem respond?
177. According to the Midrash, where do we find this response?

### **Analysis questions:**

*The science of divine punishment*

178. What important conclusion can we take from this Midrash about God's approach to punishing humans?
179. How do we understand the idea of Hashem changing his mind in deference to Moshe's arguments? Why do the original words remain in the Torah if they are no longer adhered to?

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<sup>28</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 61-62.

## *Labor*<sup>29</sup>

*Rabbi Eliezer used to say:*

*Labor is great;*

*for, as Israel were commanded to keep the Sabbath,*

*so they were commanded to labor;*

*as it says: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work" (Shemot 20:9).*

*(Avos D'reb Nasan 21)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

180. What Pasuk in Parshas Yisro is this Midrash focused on?
181. When do we say these words on Shabbos?
182. How does rabbi Eliezer understand the words, "Six days you shall labor"?
183. How else could you have understood these words?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Work is good!*

184. What important conclusion can we take from this Midrash about the Judaism's approach to work?
185. As an aside, what is the general Jewish approach to wealth? How does this differ from some other religions approach to wealth?

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<sup>29</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 63.

## *A Man*<sup>30</sup>

*Rabbi Meir used to say:*

*Whence do we know that even a Gentile who engages in the Torah is like a High Priest?*

*We learn it from: "Ye shall therefore keep My statutes, and Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them" (Lev.18:5).*

*"Priests, Levites, and Israelites" was not said, but "a man";*

*thus you may learn that even a Gentile who engages in the Torah - behold, he is like a High Priest.*

*(Avodah Zarah 3a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

186. What point is Rabbi Meir making in this statement?

187. Who does Rabbi Meir say a non-Jew who engages in Torah is greater than?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Righteous gentiles*

188. What kind of Torah do you think it refers to the non-Jew engaging in? For instance, would it make sense to say that he/she was engrossed with the laws of Kashrut if he/she is not bound by those laws?<sup>31</sup>

189. Note also that the Gemara does not state that the non-Jew "studies" the Torah, but that he/she "engages" in the Torah. What is the difference between studying the Torah and engaging in the Torah? What does this imply about the efforts the person needs to make before he/she is considered greater than then Kohen Gadol?

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<sup>30</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> See Tosfot 'She'afilu', Avodah Zarah 3a

## ***Fire of the Law***<sup>32</sup>

*Ben Azzai was sitting expounding, and a fire shone around him.*

*They came and told Rabbi Akiva:*

*Rabbi, Ben Azzai is sitting expounding, and a fire is shining around him.*

*He went to Ben Azzai and said to him:*

*I have heard that you were expounding, and a fire was shining around you.*

*He said: I was, I was.*

*He said to him: Were you engaged in the mysteries of the Divine Throne?*

*He said to him:*

*No, but I was sitting and linking the words of the Torah to one another and to the Prophets,  
and the Prophets to the Writings,*

*and the words were as happy as on the day they were given from Sinai,  
and as sweet as at the time they were given.*

*And were they not given from Sinai in fire?*

*As it is written: "...and the mountain burned with fire" (Devarim 4:11).*

*(Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:52)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

190. What happened when Ben Azzai was discussing Torah on one occasion?
191. Who went to ask him about it?
192. What part of the Torah did Rabbi Akiva expect him to have been learning when the fire shone around him?
193. Why do you think Rabbi Akiva assumed he was dealing with the deep, mystical Kabbalistic side of the Torah?
194. What did Ben Azzai tell him he had been studying?

### **Analysis questions:**

*The four Amos of Halacha*

195. What message do you think the author of this Aggadeta was teaching us about the relative importance of different parts of the Torah?
196. Is there any evidence that in today's world there are people who believe that the mystical side of the Torah is the most exciting, important, or relevant part?

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<sup>32</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 82-83.

## ***To Cry or to Rejoice***<sup>33</sup>

*When a man is born, all rejoice; when a man dies, all cry.  
But it should not be so. For when a man is born, one ought  
not to rejoice over him, for there is no knowing his fate  
and his deeds, whether he will be righteous or wicked: good or evil;  
and when he dies, one ought to rejoice, for he is departing  
with a good name, and going out of the world in peace.*

*(Kohelles Rabbah 7:4)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

197. What does this Midrash say is the general approach of man to birth and death?
198. What does this Midrash suggest should be the correct approach to these lifecycle events?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Keeping our eye on our mission*

199. Do you think the Midrash really wants us to turn our world upside down, and start to rejoice only when someone dies a righteous person, and not when there is a birth?
200. If this Midrash is not to be taken at face value, what is its purpose?
201. What evidence do you have from the Torah that it is perfectly normal and acceptable to rejoice when a child is born?
202. Why do you think the Midrash uses what seems like an extreme and provocative statement to make its point? Why didn't it make the point in simple straight-forward terms?

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## ***A Long Sleep***<sup>34</sup>

*A daughter of Rav Chisda said to him:  
Does the master desire to sleep a little?  
He said to her:  
Soon our days will be both long and short,  
and we shall sleep long and well.*

*(Eruvin 65a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

203. What innocuous question did Rav Chisda's daughter ask him?
204. How did he respond?
205. Was he actually responding to her question? If not, what was he doing?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Every minute counts*

206. What was the main message that Rav Chisda was teaching his daughter?

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<sup>33</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 100-101.

<sup>34</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 101.

## ***Final Judgment***<sup>35</sup>

*Raba said:*

*When a man is led in to be judged, he is asked:*

- 1. Have you done your business faithfully?*
- 2. Have you set yourself regular periods to study the Torah?*
- 3. Have you begotten children after you?*
- 4. Have you looked forward to redemption?*
- 5. Have you used all your wits in the study of the law?*
- 6. Have you understood how one thing will follow from another?*

*Yet even so - if "the fear of the Lord is his treasure" (Yishaya 38:6), it will go well with him; if not, it will not.*

*(Shabbat 31a)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

207. The Gemara lays out a set of questions. When does the Gemara say these questions are asked? Who are they asked to?
208. a) Do any of the questions that appear in this list surprise you?  
b) How can we attempt to explain the appearance of this question in the list?
209. What does the Gemara say is the main thing that will determine the outcome of this judgment?

### **Analysis questions:**

*Every minute counts*

210. What is the first question they ask in the next world? What does this say about the correct Jewish approach to business ethics?

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<sup>35</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, p. 102.

## ***Royal Command and that of God***<sup>36</sup>

*Rabbi Shmuel bar Susreta went up to Rome.*

*The queen lost a precious ornament and he found it.*

*A proclamation went out throughout the country:*

*'Whoever returns it in the course of thirty days, will receive such and such; after thirty days his head will be cut off.*

*He did not return it during the thirty days;*

*after the thirty days he returned it.*

*She said to him: Were you not in the country?*

*He said: Yes.*

*She said to him: And did you not hear the proclamation?*

*He said: Yes.*

*She said: And what did it say?*

*He said to her: Whoever returns it in the course of thirty days, will receive such and such; after thirty days, his head will be cut off.*

*She said to him: Then why did you not return it in the course of thirty days?*

*He said to her:*

*That you might not say I did it out of fear of you,  
but rather: out of fear of God.*

*She said to him:*

*Blessed be the God of the Jews!*

*(Talmud Yerushalmi, Bava Metzia 8c)*

### **Basic understanding questions:**

211. What had the queen in Rome lost?
212. Who had found it?
213. What was the punishment for the person who did not return it within thirty days?
214. How did she react to him?

### **Analysis questions:**

#### *Fear of God*

215. Do you think we should follow the example of Rabbi Shmuel if we were to be faced with the same situation? Explain your answer.
216. Why do you think this approach may have worked for Rabbi Shmuel, but would not necessarily work for everyone?
217. What do you think made the queen react to Rabbi Shmuel the way she did?
218. Do you think we can take a lesson from this story even if we wouldn't plan to take the same sort of action in a similar scenario?

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<sup>36</sup> Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader, pp. 106-107.