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TU BE-AV: CORRECTIVE FOR PILEGESH BE-GIVAH

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The origins and significance of *Tu Be-Av* are shrouded in mystery. On what basis does the Mishnah declare this obscure holiday, alongside *Yom Kippur*, one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar? What are we to make of these days' unusual dating ritual? Is *Tu Be-Av* merely a Jewish Valentine's day? We will contend that a close reading of the Mishnah and Gemara, coupled with an intertextual connection between our Mishnah and the final verses of *Sefer Shoftim*, lend an entirely new perspective to the holiday's meaning and contemporary relevance.

The Sugya in Ta'anit

After completing its discussion of the laws of *Tisha Be-Av*, the Mishnah (*Ta'anit* 26b), apparently looking to conclude an otherwise morose tractate on a positive note, shifts gear and declares:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and *Yom Kippur*, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothes, so as not to embarrass one who did not have. All the garments require immersion. And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? "Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward family: 'Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised' (*Mishlei* 31:30), and it says: 'Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates' (*Mishlei* 31:31)." And similarly it says: "Go forth, daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, upon the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart" (*Shir Hashirim* 3:11): "On the day of his wedding" - this is the giving of the Torah. "And on the day of the gladness of his heart" - this is the building of the Temple, may it be rebuilt speedily in our days.

Yet if the Mishnah's primary motivation is to end with "words of consolation," a number of its details seem problematic. Of what relevance is *Yom Kippur* to our discussion? And, as many commentators (e.g., *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Yakhin* 63) note, such revelry, to say the least, seems inappropriate for *Yom Kippur*. What is more, if the Mishnah's interest lies primarily in the celebratory aspect of these holidays, why does it emphasize the ways in which the young ladies cared for one another by loaning clothing to the needy? Finally, the very fact that the women took initiative by seeking out men is also striking, and not necessarily what we might have expected from members of a traditional society some 2,000 years ago. This impression is strengthened by the second verse the women invoke, "Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates," which underscores a woman's individual creative contributions.

The Talmud's (30b-31a) treatment of the Mishnah is no less curious. While claiming that the reason for *Yom Kippur*'s joy is obvious ("because it has pardon and forgiveness, the day on which the last pair of tablets were given"), the Gemara is unsure why *Tu Be-Av* is celebrated with such exuberance. The Gemara proposes no less than six explanations:

- On this day the tribes were permitted to marry one another.
- On this day the tribe of Benjamin, after having been foresworn from marrying members of the other tribes, was permitted to rejoin the nation.
- On this day the Jews stopped dying in the desert.
- On this day Hoshea Ben Elah removed the guards that Yerovam had erected to bar Israelites from traveling to the Judean Temple for the holidays.
- On this day the dead of Beitar were released for burial.
- On this day they finished cutting logs for the sacrifice pyre. (Commentaries debate whether the joy stemmed from the completion of a *mitzvah* or the time that was now available for extended Torah study.)

The sheer range of bases for *Tu Be-Av* is curious in its own right. If this holiday is so joyous and, by implication, of particular importance, why are we so unsure as to what it commemorates? (Interestingly, Rashbam *Bava Batra* 121a s.v. *yom* and others claim that the views cited in the Gemara don't disagree with one another, but simply

represent varied traditions that rabbis reported in their teachers' names.)

The continuation of the Gemara raises further difficulties. The Gemara details the precise hierarchy of clothing sharing among the maidens:

The daughter of the king borrows from the daughter of the High Priest; the daughter of the High Priest from the daughter of the Deputy High Priest; the daughter of the Deputy High Priest from the daughter of the Priest Anointed for War; the daughter of the Priest Anointed for War from the daughter of a common priest; and all the Jewish people borrow from each other, so as not to embarrass one who did not have.

The laws concerning the priests are no longer applicable. So why does the Gemara, compiled long after the Second Temple's destruction, see fit to elaborate?

Next, Rabbi Elazar extends the point, emphasizing that "even clothing stored in a box" requires immersion. Why should such an item, which in all likelihood was not rendered impure, require immersion? R. Gershom and R. Hananel claim that immersion is required on the off chance that the woman had indeed rendered the clothing impure. The Yerushalmi (*Ta'anit* 4:7) argues that while technically such clothing does not require immersion, once the woman removes the item from the box to immerse it, she is more likely to lend it to her neighbor. Rashi (31a s.v. *tzerikhin*) and Meiri (ibid., s.v. *ve-amar*), however, contend that the reasoning is the same as that of the Mishnah's general principle, namely to avoid embarrassing a girl who lacks clothing. Similarly, all clothing must be immersed equally. Particularly according to Rashi and Meiri's reading, Rabbi Elazar's ruling reinforces an observation we made regarding the Mishnah: if the goal is merely to shift *Masekhet Ta'anit* from mourning to joy, why the emphasis on the women's sensitive generosity and the temporary dismantling of economic and social-religious hierarchies?

The Gemara then cites a tradition that different girls would woo their prospective partners by emphasizing their unique qualities:

What would the beautiful women among them say? Set your eyes toward beauty, as a wife is only for beauty. What would those of distinguished lineage among them say? Set your eyes toward family, as a wife is only for children. What would the ugly ones among them say? Acquire your purchase for the sake of Heaven, provided that you adorn us with golden jewelry.

The Gemara, in other words, continues the Mishnah's emphasis on the women's independence and individual initiative, even suggesting that some women would demand jewelry for themselves!

Finally, the *sugya* (and *masekhet*) concludes with a classic *agada*:

In the future, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will arrange a dance of the righteous, and He will be sitting among them

in the Garden of Eden, and each one will point with his finger, as it is stated: "And it shall be said on that day: Behold, this is our God, for whom we waited, that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we waited. We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation" (*Yeshaya* 25:9).

While this concluding section hearkens back to the Mishnah's terminology of "*mahol*," a circle, this mere textual analogue seems to provide inadequate grounds for the Gemara's choice of this passage to conclude *Masekhet Ta'anit*. Is there a deeper connection between *Tu Be-Av* and this teaching regarding the messianic era?

Finally, it is worth noting a debate among the halakhic authorities concerning the contemporary relevance of *Tu Be-Av*. The aforementioned passage regarding the "daughter of the priest" seems to suggest that this holiday was limited specifically to the Temple period. Indeed, Shibolei Ha-leket (30) follows the Geonim in ruling that one may recite *tahanun* on *Tu Be-Av* due to the nullification of many of *Megilat Ta'anit*. Yet Shulkhan Aruch (O.C. 131:6) lists this holiday among the days on which *tahanun* is omitted, and Magen Avraham (O.C. 573:1) rules that even today one may not fast on *Tu Be-Av*. (See also *Gevurat Ari* to *Ta'anit* 31a.) Given the Gemara's implicit linkage of the Gemara to the era of priestly service, on what basis do these latter authorities rule against Shibolei Ha-leket that *Tu Be-Av* remains in force?

Pilegish Be-givah

To properly understand the holiday of *Tu Be-Av*, we cannot examine this *sugya* in isolation. Instead, it is evident that *Ta'anit* must be read in light of an episode that concludes the larger tragedy of *pilegish be-givah*, the grisly story of the concubine who was murdered by members of the tribe of Benjamin (*Shoftim* 19-21).

To review briefly, the final chapters of *Sefer Shoftim* tell the story of a man and his concubine who, upon traveling from her father's home in Beit Lehem to their house in the mountain of Ephraim, spend a night in the Benjaminite town of Gilad. Despite being put up by a hospitable man, the hosts and guests find themselves surrounded by a Sodom-esque mob. The husband sacrifices his concubine by pushing her outside the door so as to satisfy the hordes, who violate and murder the woman overnight. Upon recovering her body in the morning and returning home, the husband carves up the corpse into twelve segments and disseminates them to the tribes of Israel. Horrified by witnessing such barbarism in their midst, the rest of the nation demands of the tribe of Benjamin that they hand over the perpetrators to be killed, yet the tribe refuses. The Israelites therefore take up arms against *shevet Binyamin*. While the Benjaminites are victorious on the first two days of battle, ultimately the rest of the nation wins the civil war, killing at least 25,000 males from Benjamin, and then wiping out all their towns, including all the women.

The final chapter of *Shoftim* then turns to the question of the continuity of the tribe of Benjamin. Was an entire tribe to be lost to Israel? After all, before setting out to battle, the nation had vowed not to marry off any of their daughters to men from the tribe of Benjamin. Yet no Benjaminite women survived, seemingly condemning the tribe to extinction. To resolve this problem, they begin by identifying 400 virgins from the town of Yavesh Gilad, whose

residents had not been present when the nation accepted the oath at *Mitzpah*. Arrangements are made for the 400 women to marry men of Benjamin. Yet many Benjaminites remain unmarried. To fully resolve the issue and ensure the tribe's continuity, the elders of the nation develop another plan, with which *Sefer Shoftim* concludes (21:19-25):

They said, "The annual feast of the Lord is now being held at Shiloh." It lies north of Bethel, east of the highway that runs from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah.

So they instructed the Benjaminites as follows: "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards.

As soon as you see the girls of Shiloh coming out to join in the dances, come out from the vineyards; let each of you seize a wife from among the girls of Shiloh, and be off for the land of Benjamin.

And if their fathers or brothers come to us to complain, we shall say to them, 'Be generous to them for our sake! We could not provide any of them with a wife on account of the war, and you would have incurred guilt if you yourselves had given them [wives].'"

The Benjaminites did so. They took as wives, from the dancers whom they carried off, as many as they themselves numbered. Then they went back to their own territory, and rebuilt their towns and settled in them.

Thereupon the Israelites dispersed, each to his own tribe and clan; everyone departed for his own territory.

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased.

Reading *Ta'anit* in Light of *Pilegish Be-givah*

What are we to make of this final episode? To begin, the parallels to the ritual described in *Ta'anit* are unmistakable: the girls dancing in vineyards in the location of a Temple (Shilo or Yerushalayim) during a holiday, and the matchmaking that takes place during the festival. Reinforcing these striking similarities, the verses use turns of phrase such as "*yotzot ve-holot ba-keramim*" and "*min ha-meholot asher gazalu*," which are closely paralleled by the Mishnah's formulation of "*benot yisrael yotzot ve-holot ba-keramim*." It seems clear, as Radak (*Shoftim* 21:19) notes, that the *Mishnah Ta'anit* intentionally draws upon the verses in *Shoftim*.¹

What is more, these parallels are reinforced by the Gemara's second explanation of the unique joy associated with *Tu Be-Av*, namely that

the ban against marrying members of the tribe of Benjamin expired on that day. The Gemara even goes so far as to cite a verse from *pilegish be-givah*, "*ish mimenu*" (*Shoftim* 21:1) - "*mimenu ve-lo mi-baneinu*," "from us but not from our children" - in support of this derivation.

Having established the unmistakable connection between *Shoftim* 21:19-23 and *Ta'anit* 4:7, we can now inquire as to the significance of this relationship. To begin, let us analyze the elders' decision to encourage Benjaminites men to "snatch" women from the festival at Shilo. Does the text judge the elders positively or negatively? It is hard to know for sure. On one hand, their motivation seems to be positive: they seek to salvage the existence of *Shevet Binyamin*. On the other hand, the verses' language carries numerous negative associations. Terms such as "*va'aravtem*," "*va-hatafkhem*" and "*asher gazalu*" carry warlike or negative associations. What is more, broadly speaking, it seems clear that the story is not intended exclusively as a negative commentary on the tribe of Benjamin; Benjamin's despicable behavior is simply indicative of the larger moral breakdown in Israelite society. This certainly includes the husband himself, who sacrifices his concubine, but presumably is meant even more broadly. As the book concludes (and reiterates at key junctures throughout *Sefer Shoftim*), "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased." It therefore seems highly plausible that the text means to criticize the elders' decision to ensure a tribe's survival on the back of women who were kidnapped and coerced into unwanted marriages. At best, as R. Moshe Alshikh puts it, the elders' decision was a non-ideal one that they "did not perform in accordance with the letter of the law... [but only because] the moment necessitated such measures." Just as the tragedy of the concubine's rape features the brutalization of a vulnerable woman, so too the original biblical recording of the dancing festival involves the problematic (either due to the act itself or the larger circumstances) "snatching" of vulnerable women who had gathered for the Shilo festival.

Bearing in mind the theme of vulnerability, we may fruitfully return to the *sugya* in *Ta'anit*. As R. Tzadok of Lublin observes (*Dover Tzedek* pg. 209) and as we noted earlier, by sharp contrast to the events of *pilegish be-givah*, the Mishnah emphasizes that on *Tu Be-Av* and *Yom Kippur*, the women seize initiative in soliciting the men. Moreover, as opposed to the incident in *Shoftim*, in which women were taken *en masse*, the *Gemara Ta'anit* emphasizes that different women emphasized their unique qualities. If *pilegish be-givah* features women who are treated as vulnerable, faceless objects (note that the concubine, women and all other characters in the story go nameless), *Ta'anit* offers us a vision of self-assured young women who take initiative and distinguish themselves as individuals.

The Mishnah and Gemara then go further in counteracting the tragic episode in *Shoftim*. Not only does the *sugya* empower the women in their choosing of mates, but it also flattens the socio-economic differences among the maidens of Israel. The tragedy of *pilegish be-givah* features a powerful group (city residents) taking advantage of a vulnerable family (the guests), leading to civil war and massive devastation. By contrast, the women in *Ta'anit* go out of their way to flatten dangerous hierarchies and ensure the dignity of vulnerable women who might otherwise be embarrassed.² This resolves the

¹ For an analysis of the precise historical relationship between the two festivals, as well as the seasonal-agricultural occasions they marked, see Hayim Gilad, "*Al Ha-meholot*," in *Beit Mikra* 4:589-91.

² Ritva *Bava Batra* 121a accents this theme. He inquires, doesn't the *Mishnah Sukkah* declare that one who did not witness the *simhat beit*

question we raised earlier: the exchange of clothing, including among members of the priestly families, is not an aside but essential to the theme of our *sugya*, which is intended to remedy the tragedy of *pilegash be-givah*. It is for this reason that the Mishnah and Gemara lay so much emphasis on this point.

Our Mishnah, moreover, extends the motif one step further. “*Sheker ha-hen ve-hevel ha-yofi*,” “Grace is deceitful, and beauty is a vain thing,” declare the women. Do not judge a woman by her appearance, nor any individual by his outward characteristics. The Jewish girls go out in borrowed clothing, so as not to embarrass one another. We can no longer distinguish the poor from the rich, the ugly from the beautiful. Their garments are all immersed in the *mikvah*; they too, we can suggest, are all now equally pure. The ladies call out to the men who have gathered: don't look at beauty; beauty is deceptive. Look instead at the family and the God-fearing character the young lady represents. The key to ensuring respect for the vulnerable in society is to begin by reminding ourselves that for all the externalities, including aesthetic and socio-economic, that divide us, fundamentally we share a common human dignity and ought not be measured by artificial yardsticks.

Indeed, this might be reflected in our own reading of the story of *pilegash be-givah*. Upon first blush, we might be inclined to cast blame exclusively on the tribe of *Binyamin*. Yet upon closer analysis, as noted, the other tribes are not to be entirely absolved of all responsibility. The moral depravity of some members of *shevet Binyamin* is merely an extreme manifestation of the larger breakdown in Israelite society during the period of the Judges.

We may now return to the plethora of interpretations the Gemara offers for the unique joy associated with *Tu Be-Av*. The range of possibilities is limited to answering the question as to why the particular date of 15 Av was designated for the dating ritual. Yet the greater import of this holiday supersedes the question of the precise date on which it is observed, for the importance of learning from and correcting the sins of *pilegash be-givah* is of universal significance. While the meaning of its precise debate is subject to a variety of theories, the holiday's core themes are crystal clear.

It is in this sense that we can understand the linkage between *Tisha Be-Av* and *Tu Be-Av*, beyond their chronological proximity. The opening Mishnah of the fourth chapter discusses three fasts that, at first glance, appear similar: *Tisha Be-Av*, the *ma'amadot* (fasts of Israelites, Levites and priests who represent the community at the Temple) and *Yom Kippur*. All three share a common denominator: on only these three occasions it was customary to recite *Birkhat Kohanim* during all four daytime prayers, including *Neilah*.

The chapter goes on to demonstrate, however, that *Tisha Be-Av* and *Yom Kippur* are in fact opposites. *Tisha Be-Av* is a day of mourning,

Yom Kippur of joy. Appearances are deceiving. Two people can be dressed up in black; one attends a funeral and the other a wedding.

The tragedies detailed in the Mishnah capture the same theme. The sin of the Golden Calf, for which the Jews were forgiven on *Yom Kippur*, was due to the people's inability to look beyond the concrete. They failed to conjure a God that did not require physical manifestation, and so they built the Calf. Idolatry, which was rampant during the waning years of the First Temple period, was born of a similar inability to forsake an emotional dependency on icons. On the original *Tisha Be-Av*, the Jews took the spies' report at face value. They gave up hope instead of looking beyond the surface and digging deeper. As the prophets stressed time and again, the First Temple was destroyed in large measure due to the higher echelons' refusal to look beyond shallow class differences and care for the vulnerable in society. And according to the Rabbis (*Yoma* 9b), it was due to *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred), the inability to look beyond our friends' actions and empathize with their inner righteousness, that the Second Temple was destroyed.³

The Circles of the Righteous

Mashekhet Ta'anit concludes with the same message. The verse from *Shir Hashirim* refers to "the day of his engagement and the day of his joyous heart." This *passuk*, explains the Mishnah, is not to be taken literally. The betrothal is the Revelation at Sinai; the day of joy is when the Temple was built. As the Rabbis read *Shir Hashirim* as a whole, not everything is as it seems. The words of the verse - like the young Jews themselves - carry far deeper layers of meaning than any cursory once-over could reveal.

Finally, it is no mere association that leads the Gemara to conclude with the *agada* of the circle of the righteous. The “*mahol*” of the *tzadikim* echoes not only the dances of the girls in Jerusalem but those in Shilo as well. The circle is the ultimate equalizer. All the *tzadikim* sit equidistant from God. Clear revelation, as manifest in the ability to “point to God” and see His presence clearly, begins with the recognition that we must look beyond surface differences, which must in turn inspire us to instill dignity among those in society who are most vulnerable. On this analysis, the *sugya* strongly implies that *Tu Be-Av*'s significance is not limited to the time of the Temple or *Megilat Ta'anit*, nor is it only realized in the messianic era, but, following the rulings of Shulkhan Aruch and Magen Avraham, represents an ongoing religious charge for us to look beyond surface differences and treat all others with dignity and sensitivity. Only in doing so in our own lives can we begin to correct the tragedy of *pilegash be-givah*, and properly celebrate *Tu Be-Av* as much more than a Jewish Valentine's Day.

ha-shoeivah did not witness joy in his life? How, then, can the *Gemara Taanit* assert that *Tu Be-Av* and *Yom Kippur* were the most joyous days on the Jewish calendar? He answers by explaining that regarding Sukkot, “the joy was limited to the Temple and specifically to the giants of Israel and the priests and Levites;” here, however, the joy permeated throughout the entire nation.

³ See *Keren Orach* 30b s.v. *Amar Rashbag* for a different suggestion linking *Shiva Asar Be-Tamuz* to *Yom Kippur* and *Tisha Be-Av* to *Tu Be-Av*.

THE WATERS OF CONSULATION

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Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is famous as the Rabbi who shepherded the Jews through the destruction of the Temple. He ensured that at least one refuge for the sages (Yavneh) would remain, and established several enactments to commemorate the Temple in the new post-temple reality. In so doing, he helped blunt the full force of tragedy by providing a path forward. But what happens when the shepherd of the generation himself needs comforting?

A story in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*⁴ presents exactly such a situation. In this essay I will first present a close reading of that story and what it says about the psychology of mourning. I will then suggest that the story can also be read allegorically, connecting Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's personal loss to the national trauma of the destruction through which he lived.

The passage begins with a slightly expanded retelling of two *mishnayot* from *Avot*: *Avot* 2:8, which introduces the five students of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, his nicknames for them based on their individual virtues, and his estimation of their relative worth, and 2:9, in which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai sends his students out to discern the good and bad paths for life, and in each case prefers the response of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh over the others. In the interest of space I will not dwell on these passages nor the slight differences between *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and *mishnah Avot* here.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan then introduces an entirely new element in the portrayal of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's relationship to his students with the following passage, which has no direct parallel in the Mishnah:

When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's son died, his students came in to console him.⁵

In contrast to the previous passage (*Avot* 3:9; *ADRN* Version A, 14:5), where Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai told his students to "go out and see" (*tse'u u-re'u*) the good and bad paths for life, now it is they who "come in" (*nikhnesu*) to him. Just as each student previously presented an answer for his teacher's approval, now each student will attempt to console his teacher, who, the continuation of the story suggests, has been mourning for too long. And as before, Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh's answer will stand out.

Rabbi Eliezer entered and sat before him and said, "Rabbi, may I say something before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Adam the First had a son who died, and he accepted consolation. How do we know that he accepted consolation? As it says, 'And Adam again knew his wife.' So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Adam?"

Rabbi Eliezer sets out to "prove" to his teacher that he should accept consolation and get on with normal life the same way he has probably set out to prove countless halakhic postulates before: by

citing a verse. The attempt fails, however, because Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai relates to the biblical example not through halakhic thinking but through empathy. It's not that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai needs to know, intellectually, that moving on is the right thing to do. He needs to feel, emotionally, that it is. And bringing in an example of another bereaved parent does not help Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai move on - it only adds to his sadness.

Psychologist Susan Silk formulated an approach to grief and suffering that helps explain Rabbi Eliezer's mistake, which she calls "Ring Theory." Silk asks us to imagine the people impacted by trauma as arranged in concentric circles. The most impacted person (say, the person suffering a health crisis) is in the middle; the second-most impacted is in the next-smallest circle. Immediate family are in closer circles than extended family; close friends are closer to the inside than acquaintances. The basic principle then becomes "comfort in, dump out," which is to say, one should bring positive, supportive thoughts ("comfort") in toward those more directly affected, and process one's own negative reactions ("dump") with those further removed.

Rabbi Eliezer has "dumped in" by bringing additional sadness to the most affected person, the mourner himself, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai calls him on it.

The rest of the students enter in turn, and the same general scene repeats three more times:

Rabbi Yehoshua entered, and he said, "would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Iyov had sons and daughters and they all died on one day, and he accepted consolation over them. So too you accept consolation. How do we know that Iyov accepted consolation? As it says, 'God gave God took, let the name of God be blessed.'" He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Iyov?"

Rabbi Yosi entered and sat before him. He said, "Rabbi, would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Aharon had two adult sons, and they both died on one day, and he accepted consolation over them, as it says, 'and Aharon was silent.' Silence is nothing but consolation. So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Aharon?"

Rabbi Shimon entered, and he said, "would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "King David had a son who died, and he accepted consolation over him. So too you accept consolation. How do we know that David accepted consolation? As it says, 'David consoled Batsheva his wife, and he came into her and lay with her and she gave birth to a son...' So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of David?"

Each rabbi tries the same gambit: prove to his teacher that it is possible, and desirable, to move on after the death of a child, and

⁴ Version A, 14:6.

⁵ This translation is my own.

then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai will be compelled to do so.⁶ But Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is “stuck” in his grief not because he doesn’t understand that it is possible, for *others*, to accept consolation, but because he lacks an emotional framework that allows *him* to move out of his most intense mourning in a way that feels authentic to his experience. Enter Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh:

Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh entered. When he saw him, he said to his attendant, “take my things and come after me to the bathhouse, because he is a great man and I cannot withstand him.”

The pattern of the previous four interactions is already broken by the first line of the story. The first one to speak is not the student asking permission, but the teacher commenting to his attendant on what he expects to happen next. Getting ready to go to the bathhouse symbolizes Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s expected acquiescence to “accepting consolation.” The picture of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s mourning is suddenly much more vivid: It’s not just that he has been sad or depressed about his son’s death, but apparently he has been observing the *halakhot* of mourning, which forbid bathing for the week of *Shiva* immediately after burial,⁷ well beyond when those laws technically apply. It seems that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s ordinary functioning is impaired, and his students are not trying to hurry him past his grief, but rather to help with what even he might agree is a genuine problem.

Of course, no one can force Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to change his approach; he has to be receptive to their help. His response to the mere sight of R. Elazar, before the latter even says anything, is therefore important. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai signals his openness to changing based on whatever R. Elazar has to say before he knows what it is - and it turns out that this trust is not misplaced.

He entered and sat before him, and he said, “I will tell you an analogy. What is the thing like? A person to whom the king entrusted a package. Every day he would cry and scream and say ‘woe to me, when will I get out of this responsibility in peace?’ So you, Rabbi, you had a son. He read Torah, (*Tanakh*), Mishnah, laws, and *aggadot*, and he departed from the world without sin. You should accept consolation when you return your package intact.”

R. Elazar, first, respects the basic premise of “comfort in, dump out” by not bringing any additional sadness into Rabban Yohanan ben

Zakkai’s orbit right now. Instead, he brings an attempt at a positive or comforting thought, a reframing of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s experience in a way that may allow him to move on.

R. Elazar uses a *mashal*, an analogy. This technique lowers Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s defenses by avoiding a direct confrontation, instead presenting a seemingly unrelated scenario for his consideration.⁸ This indirect approach, combined with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s predisposition to be convinced by Rabbi Elazar, gets through to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

He said to him, “Rabbi Elazar my son, you have consoled me as people console.”

The root for consolation, *n.h.m.*, can also mean to change one’s mind (see, e.g., [Ex. 13:17](#); see also Rashi to Genesis 6:6 s.v. *el libo*), perhaps because both entail approaching the same facts anew and leaving with a different conclusion. When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai says “you have consoled me” he means, you have helped me reframe my experience - the same painful loss as it was before - just enough that it feels reasonable to change my practice and re-enter at least some of the routines of normal life.

How has R. Elazar succeeded where the others failed? In addition to “dumping in” additional trauma onto his suffering teacher, each of the biblical personalities cited can be understood to frame the death of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s own son in a distressing way.

Adam’s son Hevel was murdered by Adam’s other son, Kayin. When R. Eliezer compares Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s loss to Adam’s, he invites him to look for an obvious cause of death, such as a murder, which may only highlight the absence of anyone to blame in Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s case. In the absence of an obvious cause, further, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s thoughts had a number of unhealthy places to turn, each of which could be triggered by the subsequent students.

R. Yehoshua’s invocation of Iyov, for example, invokes the spectre of suffering inflicted by God but induced by the Satan seemingly for its own sake, or to torment (and thereby test) humans. Telling the grieving parent that his suffering is a test of faith is not comfort; it adds a religious burden (is Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai passing the test?) while also raising the possibility of anger at God.

R. Yosi’s analogy to Aharon opens a different possible wound. Aharon’s two sons died because they brought “alien fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them” ([Lev. 10:1](#)). In other words, their own improper actions caused God to kill them. R. Yosi has, essentially, suggested to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that his son died because the son deserved it - not a comforting thought.

R. Shimon’s suggestion invokes a spectre that is in some ways the opposite, but is equally unhealthy. David’s infant son died totally innocent, by definition, but it was David’s own sin that caused his death. Carrying the analogy through fully would suggest to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that he was at fault for his own son’s death - again, adding to his burden rather than reducing it.

R. Elazar, in contrast, offers a framing that explicitly negates the most painful suggestions of his colleagues. Since Rabban Yohanan ben

⁶ The biblical personalities seem to be organized in order of their appearance in history, according to the rabbis: Adam, Iyov, Aharon, David. As to why the students seem not to learn anything from the previous failed attempts, I believe the simplest answer is that the story presents them as “entering” one by one. The different biblical precedents all do have different valences, discussed more below. Adam’s son was murdered, Iyov’s died by seeming divine caprice, Aharon’s died through their own sins, and David’s son died because of David’s sin. These differences are worthy of exploration in their own right, but do not on their face show any sort of progression that would explain why one example would be expected to succeed where the previous ones had failed. If anything, the final example of David, whose son died because of his sins, seems like the least likely to console a grieving parent.

⁷ See *Ta’anit* [13b](#); *Shulkhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* [381:1](#)

⁸ This power of analogy is well illustrated by, for example, the prophet Nathan’s parable in II Sam. 12.

Zakkai's son was not the victim of another human's crime (as R. Eliezer implicitly suggested), Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai needs a way to approach the son's death that does not involve a vindictive God (per R. Yehoshua's Iyov analogy), a sinful child (per R. Yosi's Aharon analogy), or paternal fault (per R. Shimon's David analogy). R. Elazar's parable offers the way forward.

R. Elazar is careful to note that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's son "read Torah, (*Tanakh*), Mishnah, laws, and *aggadot*, and he departed from the world without sin." The recitation of what the son learned, beginning with the Bible and Mishnah, recalls the father's presumed role in teaching his son the Torah. The death is not Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's fault. The statement that in addition to being properly taught, the son did not sin, absolves the decedent as well; his death was not his own fault.

The third party (in addition to the son and the father) who has been implicitly blamed by the previous students is God. R. Elazar's parable seems intended to absolve God of vindictiveness -- God is, after all, simply recalling a deposit that was God's all along. At the same time, the analogy preserves God's ultimate power to act with what seems to us as caprice.

I will confess to not finding this last counterargument entirely compelling (and would certainly advise careful thought before deploying it in practice to a grieving person). Indeed, Rabbi Elazar's entire approach is quite fraught, as grief is not generally amenable to "arguments," no matter how sensitive. Perhaps this is why the text stresses that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai anticipated being consoled even before Rabbi Elazar spoke. By directing his attendant to gather his bath things, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai may have signalled his openness to an "argument." R. Elazar's argument, in turn, was not a blunt assertion, but a framework with which to reframe all the hurtful and painful thoughts raised by the previous students and put them at bay. In this way, the student consoled his teacher "as people console."

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's acknowledgement is strangely phrased. What does it mean to console "as people console" (*ke-derekh she-benei adam menahamim*)? What does this add to the simple statement, "you have consoled me"? What would be the alternative to consoling as people console?

Perhaps Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is implicitly criticizing his other students, whose attempted consolation has not been "as people console" but rather as something else. The four initial students tried to convince Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not by speaking to his emotional state, but through texts. That is, they attempted to console as people study texts, but not as people console. R. Elazar understands that different modes are appropriate for different settings.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan does not tell us more about R. Yohanan's reaction, leaving us to assume that he in fact went with his attendant to bathe, then resumed his normal life. But the passage does offer a curious epilogue as to the fate of the students:

When they left him, [R. Elazar] said, I will go to Damasit, to a nice place with nice waters. [The other students] said, we will go to Yavneh to a place where many students of the sages love the Torah. He, who went to Damasit, to a nice place with nice waters, his name became smaller in Torah. They, who went to Yavneh, to a place that students of the

sages are many and love the Torah, their names became greater in Torah.

When we last left Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, he was praising R. Elazar, it would seem, for not getting too caught up in textual/halakhic discourse where it was not appropriate. But the story ends with an implicit caution: don't stray too far away, either, or your Torah stature will diminish - and indeed, Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh is not quoted once in the entire Mishnah outside of *Avot*.⁹

The cause of R. Elazar's downfall is also interesting: an attraction to pleasant waters. This conclusion recalls prior appearances of water motifs. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai told his attendant to ready his things for the bathhouse because he could not "withstand" R. Elazar ("*eini yakhol la'amod bo*"). But the water imagery started even earlier. When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai describes his students in mishnah *Avot*, he calls R. Elazar "*ma'ayan ha-mitgaber*," generally understood to mean a spring that is continuously increasing in strength.¹⁰

The expansion on this in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* adds an interesting detail. There, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai describes R. Elazar as "*nahal shotef u-ma'ayan ha-mitgaber* . . . "¹¹ - a stream or wadi flowing strong with water. This image introduces something of an edge - a strong stream can be overpowering, even dangerous. We can sense, further, a hint of the same edge when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said he would be unable to "withstand" R. Elazar's consolation attempt - the waters will knock him over. And indeed, R. Elazar is the only one of the students who does not ask permission before he begins to speak, or even pause for Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to react before he has said his whole piece. R. Elazar just gushes in.

In our story, R. Elazar puts his powers to good use, but perhaps his desire to retire to a place of "nice waters" suggests some sort of a retreat from overpowering others. After all, if part of his success depends on his ability to overpower, how is what he did really different, *ex ante*, from how his colleagues tried to force Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to move on?¹²

Most of the story presents a psychological lesson about comforting the bereaved: do not "dump" additional suffering in, but instead

⁹ A parallel passage in *Shabbat* 147a adds that R. Elazar's lessened stature was not incidental, but due to a loss of expertise, and portrays R. Elazar as unable to read even a simple verse from the Torah. I have written more about that passage, and the contrasting personalities of R. Elazar and R. Eliezer as depicted in Mishnah *Avot*, [elsewhere](#).

¹⁰ "A spring that [ever] gathers force" (Joshua Kulp translation on Sefaria); "A spring flowing stronger and stronger" ([Artscroll Siddur](#)).

¹¹ The full [cite](#) reads- "A wadi in flood, and a spring that grows ever stronger, whose waters grow stronger and go outside, to fulfill that which is written (Prov. 5:16) 'Your springs will gush forth In streams in the public squares.'"

¹² Alternatively, perhaps it is his very overpowering tendency to break through boundaries that causes him to strike out on his own rather than more meekly follow the pack.

bring them a framework to understand their experiences without destructively blaming themselves, the deceased, or God.

At the same time, the hints of violence (the flooding wadi that knocks Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai over) raise an insurmountable problem with encountering others in their vulnerability. When someone is hurt or lost and needs guidance, some amount of persistence, or insistence, may be required to get through to them. At the same time, once the consoler is in the mode of pushing past defenses, and when the consolee is vulnerable or with defenses down, it is very easy to overstep and overpower. Perhaps this is “the way people console” - with empathy and sensitivity built on a pre-existing relationship, but also with a persistence that can cross boundaries, for better or worse. R. Elazar has consoled in the normal human way, avoiding the permission-seeking of his peers, and thus to some degree necessarily involved an intrusion onto Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

The story works through Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s personal loss with psychological subtlety. I would like to suggest that the story can also be read allegorically as referring not only to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s personal loss, but the national loss of the Churban as well.

The phrase “*nahal shotef*” itself appears in [Isaiah 66:12](#)¹³: “For thus said the LORD: I will extend to her prosperity like a stream (*nahar*), The wealth of nations like a wadi in flood (*nahal shotef*); And you shall drink of it. You shall be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees.” The next verse continues: “As a mother comforts her son so I will comfort you (*anahemkhem*); You shall find comfort in Jerusalem.”

From a literary perspective, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* is foreshadowing R. Elazar’s success in comforting Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai from the very first description of him - the *nahal shotef* is already associated with consolation, *nehamah*, from Isaiah. When the text later introduces Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in mourning, the reader has a hint which student will be the best consoler. Like a flooding wadi, R. Elazar then sweeps Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to the bath.

The literary connection to Isaiah suggests, ever so faintly, an analogy between Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and the Jewish people after destruction - both in need of consolation. This connection, in fact, fits well with the biographical information for which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is best known (see [Gittin 56a-b](#)): Feigning his death to be smuggled out of a besieged Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai approached the Roman general (soon to become Emperor) Vespasian. When Vespasian gave him an opportunity to make a request, he requested “Give me Yavneh and its sages.” By failing to ask for Jerusalem to be saved, he apparently acquiesced to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, trying instead to salvage at least some refuge for Torah scholars to rebuild.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was no doubt consumed with self-doubt over his actions: had he, in fact, been an agent of salvation by guaranteeing the security of at least some sages? Or had he missed an opportunity to save Jerusalem? Perhaps the deceased son in our story can be read as a metaphor for this loss of Jerusalem. It is the

destruction of the temple that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was unable to move past.

Carrying on the analogy, the responses of the four initial students could be read to blame the destruction on: criminals, akin to Kayin who killed Hevel (and indeed the *Gemara* in *Gittin* places a good deal of blame on the Jewish Zealots for the fate that befell their fellow Jews); a vengeful God akin to *Iyov*’s; the people of Israel for their sins, akin to Aharon’s sons; and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai himself, akin to David. Indeed, the same passage in the Talmud records opinions apparently blaming Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai for not asking Vespasian to spare Jerusalem.

R. Elazar’s consolation, for its part, can also easily be read into the same allegorical vein. He encourages Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not to blame himself, and to take pride in the Torah knowledge his spiritual descendants have amassed. As for the physical destruction, the Temple was a deposit from God, and it is not our place to determine when it should be “returned.”

If the interaction is an allegory, it also casts the end of the story in a new light. R. Elazar successfully consoles Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that he did the best he could by saving the sages, but it seems that R. Elazar himself is perhaps too comfortable with the precarious status-quo of Torah study post-destruction. His colleagues, sensing the urgency of consolidating Torah as much as possible, go to Yavneh, living out Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s vision for that place. R. Elazar, in contrast, leaves his colleagues for a place of nice water. Perhaps the same power of reframing that allowed R. Elazar to successfully console Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai has allowed R. Elazar to convince himself that things are better than they are, and that his presence in Yavneh is not essential.

Comfort is powerful, but it is also dangerous. It is often someone willing to intrude a bit, a wadi flooding over its banks, who brings the needed consolation. At the same time, that person must remain hyper-aware of the limits and dangers of the interaction. The comforter must be careful not to carry his interlocutor away, and not to be carried away himself. R. Elazar successfully breaks down Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s unhealthy boundaries. But the same power of optimistic reframing, perhaps, leads him to break his own bonds with his community.

Isaiah, in contrast, looks forward to a time when it is God comforting Israel like a flooding wadi. Then it will not be a question of reframing a loss in a tolerable way, of convincing Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that saving Yavneh was the best he could do, but rather in undoing the loss itself. “You shall find comfort in Jerusalem.”

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¹³ Isaiah 66 is the *haftarah* for *shabbat rosh hodesh*.