

Money and Power

Rav Avi Strausberg

UNIT 1 Money and Power

SESSION 1 When Leaders Go Bad, Where Do We Draw The Line?

◇ **Can you separate an artist from his art?**

Take a look at this great [article](#) about Pablo Picasso, who was notoriously terrible to his wives and son.

ALL OF THE TIME, WE ARE CONFRONTED BY THE REALITY THAT sometimes the people we hold up as great leaders, people who are brilliant artists, effective politicians, and generous philanthropists, who have given much to society and have much more to offer, can also be deeply flawed individuals. What do we do when we find out that one of these people has crossed an ethical red line? What happens to their leadership and how do we respond?

IN THIS SESSION, WE'RE GOING TO LOOK AT TWO DIFFERENT stories from the talmud that examine this question, "Can you remember the Torah and forget the deeds," or in other words, "Can you separate an artist from his art?" ◇ When we find out about a person's moral wrongdoing, can we continue to benefit from this person's Torah, and here I mean Torah in the most expansive sense of the word, or do we lose the Torah along with the leader? What criteria do we use to access this question and is the answer to this question different depending on the field of the leader's expertise? Do we answer differently for artists and scientists than we do for rabbis and teachers?

◇ **Talmud Moed Katan**

The Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Bavli is the monolithic masterpiece of ancient Babylonian Jewry. It is built upon the Mishnah (but frequently digresses) and is mostly finished in the 6th century CE. The section of Moed Katan contains many of the laws of mourning. Mourners are in some ways cut off from their communities. In this context, the Talmud discusses the status of people who have been communicated—cut off from the community because of their actions.

◇ **Rav Yehuda said to Rabbah...**

Rav Yehudah lives in Babylon and is an expert in Babylonian traditions of his teachers. Rabbah bar bar Hanah, on the other hand, is known for travelling back-and-forth between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel and so has access to traditions that Rav Yehudah has never learned. This is why Rav

DOES A TEACHER NEED TO BE AN ANGEL?

Take a look at the following text from the Talmud of Massechet Moed Katan that deals with one such leader who is suspected to have “gone bad.” As you read, think about:

1. How do the rabbis handle this case of a corrupt leader?
2. What are the competing values they juggle?

SOURCE #1 ס

תלמוד בבלי מועד קטן דף
 יז עמוד א
 הווא צורבא מרבנן
 דהוו סנו שומעניה
 א"ר יהודה היכי
 ליעביד לשמתיה
 צריכי ליה רבנן
 לא לשמתיה קא
 מיתחיל שמא
 דשמיא

א"ל לרבב"ח
 מידי שמיע לך בהא
 א"ל הכי א"ר
 יוחנן מאי
 דכתיב (מלאכי ב, ז) כי
 שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת
 ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי
 מלאך ה' צבאות הוא אם
 דומה הרב למלאך ה'
 יבקשו תורה
 מפיו ואם
 לאו אל יבקשו
 תורה מפיו

שמתיה רב יהודה
 לסוף... א"ר יהודה
 א"ר יהודה

Babylonian Talmud Talmud Moed Katan 17a ◇

There was a certain Torah scholar who gained a bad reputation due to rumors about his conduct. **Rav Yehudah said: What should be done? To excommunicate him** is not an option. **The Sages need him**, as he is a great Torah authority. **Not to excommunicate him** is also not an option, as then **the name of Heaven would be desecrated.**

Rav Yehuda said to Rabbah bar bar Hanah: Have you heard anything with regard to this issue? ◇ He said to him: Rabbi Yoanan said as follows: **What is the meaning of that which is written: “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah at his mouth; for he is a messenger [malakh] of the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2:7)?** This verse teaches: **If the teacher is similar to an angel [malakh] of the Lord, then seek Torah from his mouth, but if he is not pure and upright, then do not seek Torah from his mouth;** even if he is knowledgeable about Torah, do not learn from him.

Based on this statement, **Rav Yehudah ostracized that Torah scholar... A wasp came**

Yehudah asks him. Rabbah responds to him with a tradition from his teacher in Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Yohanan.

◇ לטוף...

If you want to learn some wild Talmud, go to Sefaria and check in on this ellipsis!

◇ Amah

An *amah* is literally (and usually) a forearm, but it can be used euphemistically to refer to a penis.

וטרקיה אאמתיה **and stung** the ostracized scholar **on his amah** ◇
 ושכיב **and he died...**

Explanation from Rav Avi Strausberg

When we begin the story, it's unclear exactly what the young scholar has done wrong and if he has even done anything wrong at all. What we know is that many rumors are circulating about his bad behavior. By the end of the story, we are told that after spending a lifetime in excommunication, many years in which he would be unable to take part in prayer life and no one could learn from his teachings, that he was eventually stung on his amah and died. Later rabbinic commentators understood this to mean that he was stung on his penis, taking this as a proof that the rumors about him were right after all, and that the nature of his death reveals the nature of his sin, i.e. sexually inappropriate behavior.

Questions from Rav Avi Strausberg

1. Think about Rav Yehudah's original decision as to whether he should excommunicate this scholar or not.

What was at stake for him in that moment? What do you think he was thinking about?

2. *What do you think the Talmud means when it says, "If the teacher is similar to an angel of the Lord, then seek Torah from his mouth, and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth"? What is the standard that is being set? Is this a desirable standard for our leaders? Is this a reasonable standard? Why or why not?*

3. Now think about this story in our context of "Can you remember the Torah and forget the deeds?"

Can we continue to learn from and benefit from a leader even if we know or have good reason to suspect that he or she is morally corrupt?

4. *Why do you think it was so important to the later rabbis to interpret the word amah as penis? What's at stake in this interpretation?*

"REMEMBER HIS TORAH, BUT DO NOT REMEMBER HIS DEEDS"

Take a look at the stories below about Elisha ben Abuya, who is known as Aher or the "Other," meaning the one who came to be on the outside. There is much to be said about once rabbinic insider Elisha ben Abuya, but what's most important for our purposes is that he was once a great rabbi and Torah scholar who later was excommunicated for his heresy and disbelief in God and Torah. The first story here plays out how one can think about his legacy—can you still learn from Elisha ben Abuya's teachings while disregarding his heresy?

◇ **Babylonian Talmud Hagiga**

This part of massekhet Hagigah is conceptually related to the verse quoted in Mishnah 1:6, “A twisted thing cannot be made straight, a lack cannot be made good” (Ecclesiastes 1:15). On this note, the Gemara discusses Aher, a famous heretic who is unable return to the fold.

◇ **Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi**

Also known as Judah the Prince. One of the most important of the mishnaic rabbis—so important he is normally called simply “Rabbi,” without name.

◇ **Job 18:19**

The verse refers to the fate of the wicked (see Job 18:5).

SOURCE #2 ס

תלמוד בבלי תגיגה דף טו
עמוד ב
בתו של אחר אתיא לקמיה
דרבי, אמרה ליה: רבי,
פרנסני.

אמר לה:
בת מי את? - אמרה לו: בתו
של אחר אני.

אמר לה: עדיין יש מזרעו
בעולם? והא כתיב לא נין
לו ולא נכד בעמו ואין שריד
במגוריו!

אמרה לו: זכור לתורתו ואל
תזכור מעשיו. מיד ירדה אש
וסכסכה ספסלו של רבי. בכה
ואמר רבי

ומה
למתגנין בה -
כך, למשתבחין בה -
על אחת כמה וכמה.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 15b◇

The daughter of Aher came before Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] and said to him: Rabbi, provide me with sustenance.

He said to her:

Whose daughter are you? She said to him: I am the daughter of Aher.

He said to her: Is there still of his seed remaining in the world? But isn't it stated: “He shall have neither son nor grandson among his people or any remaining in his dwellings” (Job 18:19)?◇

She said to him: Remember his Torah, and do not remember his deeds. Immediately, fire descended and licked Rabbi's bench where he was sitting. Rabbi wept and said: If God sends fire to protect the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor.

Explanation from Rav Avi Strausberg

When Aher's daughter comes before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi needing help to survive, he is quick to dismiss her and is surprised to even encounter her after her father's excommunication. In response to Rabbi's dismissive response, she argues, “Remember his Torah, and do not remember his deeds.” Fire descends and touches the very bench where Rabbi is sitting and he begins to cry saying, “If God protects the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor.”

Questions from Rav Avi Strausberg

1. What does it mean to “Remember his Torah and do not remember his deeds”?
2. What do you think of this approach? What does God seem to think of this approach based on what happens in this section?

◇ **Gadol**

The opposites *gadol* and *katan* (literally “big” and “small”) could refer to several different contrasts, most notably here: “big” = adult, and “small” = minor; or “big” = great in wisdom, and “small” = lacking in wisdom.

3. *What does Rabbi mean when he says, “If God protects the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor”?*
4. *Why does he cry?*

One of the fascinating aspects of Elisha ben Abuya was how his friend and student Rabbi Meir continued to learn from him, even after his heresy. The text of the Talmud continues questioning how he could do this.

<p style="text-align: center;">ורבי מאיר היכי גמר תורה מפומיה דאחר? והאמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן: מאי דכתיב (מלאכי ב:ז) "כי שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא", אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבאות - יבקשו תורה מפיהו. ואם לאו - אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו!</p>	<p>And Rabbi Meir, how could he learn Torah from the mouth of Aher? But didn't Rabbah bar bar Hanah say that Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah from his mouth; for he is an angel of the Lord of hosts” (Malakhi 2:7)? If the rabbi is similar to an angel of the Lord of hosts, they should seek Torah from his mouth; but if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth!</p>
<p>אמר ריש לקיש: רבי מאיר קרא אשכח ודרש (משלי כב:יז) "הט אזנך ושמע דברי חכמים ולבך תשית לדעתי". לדעתם לא נאמר, אלא לדעתי...</p>	<p>Reish Lakish said: Rabbi Meir found a verse and interpreted it: “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to My knowledge” (Proverbs 22:17). It does not state “to their knowledge,” but “to My knowledge.”...</p>
<p>קשו קראי אהדדי! -</p>	<p>The verses contradict each other!</p>
<p>לא קשיא, הא - בגדול, הא - בקטן.</p>	<p>This is not difficult. This case is referring to a gadol;◇ whereas that case is referring to a katan.</p>

◇ **When Rav Dimi came**

Like Rabbah bar bar Hanah above, Rav Dimi is also known for going back-and-forth between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel and bringing traditions from there, “the west” (it is west from Babylonia, modern day Iraq).

Explanation from Rav Avi Strausberg

The Talmud first reinforces what’s motivating the question “How did Rabbi Meir learn Torah by Aher,” by bringing the same verse we saw above in Moed Katan from Malakhi which suggests one can only learn Torah from an angel. If Aher was a heretic, certainly he was no angel of God, so how can it be that Rabbi Meir continued to learn Torah from him?

1. According to Reish Lakish, what verse does Rabbi Meir find that gives him permission to learn from him? How does he understand this verse?

But, then, there’s a problem. There’s a contradiction between the two verses. From Malakhi, we understand that we may only learn Torah from an angel and from Proverbs, we learn that we may learn from anyone as long as we only apply our hearts to God’s knowledge.

1. How does the Talmud resolve this difficulty?
2. Which verse is talking about a “gadol” (whether understood as an adult or someone who is great in wisdom) and which verse is talking about a “katan” (which would be the opposite—either a minor or someone lacking in wisdom)? What do you think about this resolution?

Continue reading the final part of this story, and think about:

1. What are the two metaphors used to think about corrupt leaders and how we should relate to their Torah?
2. What do you think of these metaphors?

<p>כי אתא רב דימי אמר, אמרי במערבא: רבי מאיר אכל תחלא ושדא שיחלא לברא. דרש רבא: מאי דכתיב אל גנת אגוז ירדתי לראות באבי הנחל וגו' למה נמשלו תלמידי חכמים לאגוז? לומר לך: מה אגוז זה, אף על פי שמלוכלך בטיט ובצואה - אין מה שבתוכו נמאס, אף תלמיד חכם,</p>	<p>When Rav Dimi came ◇ from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, he said: In the west [Eretz Yisrael], they say: Rabbi Meir ate a half-ripe date and threw the peel away. Rava taught: What is the meaning of that which is written: “I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley” (Song of Songs 6:11)? Why are Torah scholars compared to nuts? To tell you: Just as this nut, despite being soiled with mud and excrement, its content is not made repulsive; so too a Torah scholar,</p>
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◇ **Rabbah bar Shila found Elijah**

In Jewish tradition, Elijah the prophet never died and often appears to talmudic rabbis, and sometimes reports what is going on in heaven.

◇ **Spilled**

This is a tradition of Rabbi Meir known from Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5. The point of this is that God once again quotes his traditions by name, and even calls him “my son”!

אף על פי שסרה -
 אין תורתו נמאסת.
 אשכחיה רבה בר שילא
 לאלהו,
 אמר ליה: מאי קא
 עביד הקדוש ברוך הוא?
 אמר ליה: קאמר שמעתא
 מפומייהו דכולהו רבנן,
 ומפומיה דרבי מאיר לא
 קאמר.

אמר ליה: אמאי? משום
 דקא גמר שמעתא מפומיה
 דאחר. אמר ליה: אמאי?
 רבי מאיר
 רמון מצא, תוכו אכל,
 קליפתו זרק!

אמר ליה: השתא
 קאמר: מאיר בני אומר:
 בזמן שאדם מצטער שכינה
 מה לשון אומרת - קלני
 מראשי, קלני מזרועי.
 אם כך הקדוש ברוך הוא
 מצטער על דמן של
 רשעים - קל וחומר
 על דמן של צדיקים
 שנשפך.

although he has sinned,
 his Torah is not made repulsive.

The Gemara relates: **Rabbah bar Shila found Elijah** ◇ the prophet, who had appeared to him. **He said to Elijah: What is the Holy One, Blessed be He, doing?** Elijah said to him: **He is stating laws transmitted by all of the Sages, but in the name of Rabbi Meir God will not speak.**

He said to him: Why? He replied: **Because he learned tradition from the mouth of Aher. He said to him: Why should he be judged unfavorably for that? Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate and ate its contents while throwing away its peel!** [Elijah conceded this point.]

He said to him: Now God is saying: My son, Meir, says: When a person suffers, how does the Divine Presence express itself? Woe is Me from My head, woe is Me from My arm. If the Holy One, Blessed be He, suffers to such an extent over the blood of the wicked, how much more so does He suffer over the blood of the righteous that is spilled. ◇

Explanation from Rav Avi Strausberg

At the end of the story, it appears that the Holy One is teaching Torah in everyone’s names except Rabbi Meir because he learned Torah from Aher. Rabbah bar Sheilah is surprised and argues on his behalf, “But why? He merely took the pomegranate and threw away the peel,” which seems to have been the bottom line of the Talmud, so why is Rabbi Meir being punished for that? Elijah takes this back to God and God then begins transmitting Torah also in the name of Rabbi Meir, seeming to concede that perhaps it was permissible for Rabbi Meir to learn from Aher.

Questions from Rav Avi Strausberg

1. What do you make of this strange ending to the story?
2. At the end of the day, where does this text leave us on the question of how we should relate to corrupt leaders and their work? Do we take their Torah and forget their deeds? In what circumstances is this permissible and in what circumstances do we say that the two cannot be separated?
3. Now compare this cycle of stories about Elisha ben Abuya to our first text from Moed Katan. How do their bottom lines differ? Is there a way to reconcile them? Do you agree with one of them more than the other? If so, why?