

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

RABBI AKIBA AND HIS TEACHER, NACHUM GAMZU (Part 2)

The Bavli retells Nahum Ish Gamzo's story in an even more exaggerated way. It is placed in tractate Taanit, which describes how communities would fast and suffer in order to appease God and cause rain to fall on their parched land. Nahum's story is set among many other tales of miracles wrought as reward for righteousness which reflect the principle of "measure for measure". For example, a fire spreads through a city but does not effect one neighborhood. This is because a woman in that neighborhood allowed her neighbors to use her oven (heated by fire) on Shabbat so that they might all have hot meals. As she was righteous in her use of fire so she, and her whole neighborhood, were spared from fire (B. Taanit 21b). The mishnah under discussion here mentions walls and buildings which are dilapidated that may pose a hazard to the community. Stories are told in the gemara relating how totally righteous persons were not afraid of having the wall of such a building fall on them, as their merit protected them from disaster (e.g., B. Taanit 20b).

It was said of Nahum Ish Gamzo that he was blinded in both his eyes. His two hands were cut off. His two legs were amputated and his whole body was covered with boils and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed the feet of which were standing in bowls of water in order to prevent the ants from crawling on to him [since he was unable to drive them off his body himself]. His students sought to remove his bed [from the house] and afterward take out the utensils [from thence]. He said to them, "My sons, take out the utensils and afterward take out my bed for I assure you that all the time that I am in the house, the house will not fall." They took out the utensils and afterward took out his bed and the house [immediately] fell down.

His students said to him, "Rabbi, you are [clearly] a thoroughly righteous person [so] why has [all this suffering] happened to you?" He said to them, "I brought it on my self, for one time I was walking on the way to the house of my father-in-law and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink and one with all kinds of dainties. One poor man came and stood in my way and said to me, "Rabbi, sustain me [with something to eat]." I said to him, "Wait until I unload [something] from the ass. And I did not succeed to unload [something] from the ass before he died [from hunger]. I went and fell upon his face and I said, 'My eyes, which did not have pity upon your eyes, may they become blind. My hands, which did not have pity upon your hands, may they be cut off. My legs, which did not have pity on your legs, may they be amputated.' And my conscience was not quiet until I said, 'May my whole body be covered with boils'" They [his students] said to him, "Alas for us that we should see you like this." He said to them, "Alas for me if you did not see me like this!" (B. Taanit 21a)

First, let us outline the differences between this version of the story and the Yerushalmi's. There, Nahum promises to feed the beggar when he returns from his visit, here he promises to feed the beggar as soon as he begins to unload his beasts of burden. There he is taking an unspecified gift, here he is bringing a veritable caravan of treasure. There, he is chided by onlookers and only then curses himself with blindness, amputation of his hands and lameness. Here, no one chides him and he curses himself with all the disabilities mentioned in the Yerushalmi and with boils as well. There, he chides Rabbi Akiba for not comprehending how suffering can atone for sin. Here, he accepts the questioning of his suffering by his disciples and explains it to them. There, there is no mention of his utter righteousness. Here, it is made explicit that, disabled though he is, this does not mean he is a sinner. Indeed, so righteous is he that he can be sure a building will not fall upon him, one of the highest levels of righteousness one can achieve and a level which many sages do not attain (B. Taanit 20b).

Perhaps the most important difference between the two versions of Nahum's story is the different contexts in which they are placed. Both the passage in the Yerushalmi and the one in the Bavli are set in discussions of midah k'neged

midah but there the issue is related to the giving of charity and here its context is related to miracles being wrought for the righteous. It is important to know that this story is immediately followed in the Bavli by one in which Nahum is traveling on his way to present a bag of jewels to the Emperor in order to save the Jewish people. As he is traveling to see the Emperor, he is robbed of the jewels by some innkeepers who put earth in his bag, instead. When he discovers the robbery, he exclaims that this, too, is for the best. He goes to court and presents the bag of earth. The Emperor becomes insulted and imprisons Nahum. The prophet Elijah appears and suggests that the earth may have magic powers, which indeed, it does. Nahum is released from prison and rewarded with a bag full of jewels. On his way home, Nahum stays at the same inn where he was originally robbed. The innkeepers are, needless to say, surprised to see Nahum alive. They ask what Nahum took to the emperor and Nahum replies that it was the earth he took from here that was so precious to the Emperor. The innkeepers thereupon tear down their inn, takes the earth therefrom and present it to the Emperor. It is found ineffective and the innkeepers are put to death.

The two stories make up two halves of a whole passage. Both stories point to the observation, at the center, that Nahum consistently maintains an attitude of acceptance by saying, "This, too, is for the best." The parallel construction may be summarized as follows:

"This, too, is for the best!"	
Suffering accepted	Stolen jewels accepted by Nahum
Puts punishment on self	Imprisoned
Encounters man on road	Elijah appears
House stays up for Nahum	Justice is achieved

This deliberate literary composition helps flesh out two insights for the reader. First, as the second half of the piece is manifestly a fairy-tale, so the first half should be understood likewise. And second, Nahum's story is not told as a general way of regarding disabilities but as a special case of an exceptionally righteous man and his acceptance of misfortune which goes well beyond anything the average person is required to do. These two stories, and the context in which they are set, point to the importance of the principle midah k'neged midah. This is a theological insight which can be illustrated but not legislated.

The passages we have examined in this chapter fall mainly in the category of "folk tales". They are not statements of what is, but of what ought to be. Unpunished wrongs create tension in individuals and societies. The concept of midah k'neged midah demonstrates how God brings justice into human situations, often using the human body to achieve that end.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do these two stories compare with each other? Which do you prefer? Why?