

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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## RABBI PINCHAS BEN YAIR, JUDAISM'S PIED PIPER

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Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair is a contemporary of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi and is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's son-in-law. That, alone, would probably qualify him for the "spiritually powerful but strange" category. (Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is the one who stayed in a cave with his son for a total of 13 years, fire comes out of his eyes, etc.) The following stories in the Yerushalmi (echoed in Deuteronomy Rabbah) portray him as sage and magical, especially with mice:

Two paupers deposited two bushels of barley for safekeeping with Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. While the bushels were in his keeping, he sowed and reaped them and gathered them in. When they came to take back their barley, he said to them: Bring camels and asses to carry all your barley (//Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:3).

So far, so good. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair is acting most righteously, but you'd expect nothing less from so great a sage. Then things get a little stranger:

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair once went to a certain place. The villagers came to him. They said: Mice are eating all our grain. He compelled the mice and they gathered together. They began to squeak. He said to the villagers: Do you know what they are saying? They said: No. He said to the villagers: They are saying that the grain has not been tithed. The villagers said to him: Pledge to us (i.e.,pledge yourself as surety for us that if we tithe our grain properly the mice will not eat it all). He pledged to them and they were not harmed by the mice any further (//Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:3).

We're still on the topic of grain but Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair is just giving the villagers courage. They're afraid to tithe their grain because, between the tithes and the mice, they figure they won't have anything left. He brokers a deal with the mice that if the villagers tithe their grain, the mice won't eat what's left.

Once a pearl belonging to the king of Sarkia fell down and a mouse swallowed it up. The king came before Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. Rabbi Pinchas said to the king: Who am I, a spellbinder? The king said to Rabbi Pinchas: I have come to you because of your reputation. Rabbi Pinchas compelled the mice and they gathered together. He saw one of them walking like a hunchback. He said: That one has it. He compelled it and it disgorged the pearl. (Y. Demai 1:3, 22a)

Word has apparently gotten around about Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair can negotiate with mice. He gets the mice together and figures out which one has the pearl. He's merciful with the mice: he doesn't even kill the one that ate the pearl; he just forces the mouse to expel it.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. So what is magic in Judaism in the Yerushalmi? When is it magic? Is it ok to think of the sages as miracle workers/magicians?
2. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair works miracles in the final two stories but the first one is simply a case of honest stewardship. What is the Yerushalmi saying by grouping these three stories together? What do good stewardship, righteousness and outright magic have in common? What differentiates them?
3. It has to be asked: have you ever witnessed a miracle-working rabbi? If so, what happened?