

## Talmud Live Talmudic Stories with Paragraph Descriptions

Mishael Zion, November 2016

### Section I: "Companionship or Death": Stories of Relationships in the Talmud ..... 8

1. The Tragic Tale of the Best Hevruta Ever: The Gladiator and the Beard-less Rabbi  
Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish | Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 84b ..... 9

Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish, a teacher and a retired gladiator, were known to be the best *Havruta* (Aramaic for 'study partners') in the Talmud, yet their relationship ended in tragedy. The tale begins with their first encounter in the Jordan River – a sexually charged meeting of two disparate cultures and two intense men, which turns into a deeply transformative moment. It story continues with the day it all came apart – never to be mended.

Through the figures of R. Yohanan, Resh Lakish, and Resh Lakish's wife, learners are compelled explore the following questions: What does it mean to be a man? Where does power lie in this world? Who is the ideal study partner – the combatant or the supporter? What happens when the tutee surpasses the mentor? And can transformation truly occur within us?

2. Rabbis, Wives and the Other Woman: An Unforgiving Tale for Yom Kippur  
Rabbi Rehomei | Talmud Bavli Ketubot 62b ..... 14

How do we balance our different loves? How do we navigate between our passions and our obligations, between our need to be somewhere at a certain time, and how easily we get distracted? This is a story about one scholar who loved studying so much - or perhaps a professional who loved working so much - that he barely went home; until one day he never came home at all. And it's a story about tears - one tear, actually - and the power of a single tear to bring the house down. It is the story of Rav Rehomei, Rabbi Love.

3. Ilfa Gets a Job: Hunger and the Search for Authenticity  
Ilfa and Rabbi Yochanan | Talmud Bavli Taanit 21b ..... 20

How do I know I'm making the right decisions in life? Should I listen to my doubts or muster the courage to make a radical change? Do I dare dedicate my life to what I'm passionate about even as I fear I will not find material success or even basic sustenance?

In this Talmudic tale, two young men decide to change course, leaving the ivory tower of study and the poverty it created, to try and carve out a living for themselves. One returns to the house of study, while the other succeeds out in the world.

This is a tale of the search for meaning and success in life, the ability to harbor doubt and to navigate ambiguity. It is also a tale of friendship and betrayal, and of the need for external validation.

### Section II: Authority, Politics and Pluralism: Behind the Scenes of the Rabbinic Intellectual Revolution ..... 22

4. From Jerusalem To Yavneh: The Founding Myth of Talmudic Judaism

Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai leaves Jerusalem | BT Gittin 55b-56b .....23

Night time in Jerusalem, a starving and divided city under siege from the Roman Empire without and the knife of zealots within. One man sneaks out of the city walls, feigning death in order to escape – and gives Judaism new life in the process.

In one short story, the Talmud epitomizes how Judaism turned from a Temple-based religion to a scholarly civilization that could survive 2000 years of diaspora and dispersion. Alongside the tale, three basic ideas of Rabbinic Judaism are offered.

**5. How Hillel Became President: Who is an Authority in the Jewish World?**

The Forgotten Halakha in Three Acts | Tosefta Pesahim 4:13-14, Talmud Bavli Pesahim 66a, Yerushalmi Pesahim .....28

The night before Passover, and the pilgrims at the Temple in Jerusalem are in panic. Passover fell this year on a Saturday night, and it turns out the religious leadership doesn't offer clear guidance about whether the preparations for the Paschal Lamb offering can be done on the Sabbath.

Into this vacuum of leadership enters an outsider, Hillel from Babylonia, and in a short series of exchanges becomes President of Israel. Thus the Talmud introduces us to the figure of Hillel, and through him to the basics of Talmudic scholastic study, and the tensions between tradition and innovation.

This tale was so popular it was told three separate times in the Talmudic literature, and each time with a totally different moral to the story (and a different sense of humor). Comparing these three texts allows us to explore various visions of authority and innovation, how the Torah is to be studied, and who is an authority in the Jewish world.

**6. "It's Not Heaven": Power to Interpret, Power to Shame**

The Oven of Akhnai | TB Baba Metzia 59a-59b .....32

If there is one Talmudic story that became most crucial in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is this one. As the authority for interpretation and action in the Jewish world shifted – according to many readers – from Divine powers to human hands, Jews from across the spectrum reached back to study the "Oven of Akhnai," in which two Rabbinic figures battle out whether the authority over truth lies in the hands of God, or whether "It does not reside in Heaven!"

The second half of this tale, however, asks a different series of questions: How does a society deal with minority opinions, especially ones that threaten the very fabric of the community? Brought within the context of verbal wrongdoing, the Talmud reframes this tale of human authority into an exploration of the possible abuse of power, and the uncontrollable power of shame.

**7. Epilogue to the Oven of Akhnai**

The Passing of Rabbi Eliezer | TB Sanhedrin 68.....36

Years after the tale of the Oven of Akhnai, R. Eliezer, now an outcast, is on his deathbed. His students, despite the ban on socializing with him, come to pay their respects. How will the students, torn between their loyalty to their teacher and to their community, navigate this space? How will R. Eliezer receive them?

**8. Moshe in Rabbi Akiva's Beit Midrash**

Talmud Bavli Menachot 29b.....38

If you could visit the future, and see how your own writings are being studied – would you do it? How are we remembered, and who has the license to interpret our own body of work (or God’s)? These questions are explored by this tale, in which God transports Moses from Sinai to R. Akiva’s Beit Midrash. In the crises that unfold there, the Rabbis reveal their own humorous self-awareness at the extent of re-interpretation that the Rabbinic project involved. In the meantime, Moses is forced to deal with his own imposter syndrome. And God teaches a valuable lesson about the centrality of silence.

**9. Jewish Law and the Politics of Disagreement: Hillel and Shammai Revisited**

Assorted Discussion of Hillel and Shammai .....39

Of all the contributions of Talmudic culture to the Jewish world, the most central is the positive power of dispute, or *machloket*. Not all types of dispute, mind you, but rather disputes for the sake of heaven. These questions were explored first and foremost through the stories and disputes of Hillel and Shammai and their students, perhaps the first dispute within Judaism that did not lead to a schism, but rather to the normalizing of disagreement.

The texts herein introduce three basic disputes of Hillel and Shammai, and brings to the forefront three ways of engaging with disagreement: pluralism, tolerance and deviance.

**10. Yalta Breaks Some Barrels: The Talmud’s Most Learned Woman Teaches a Lesson**

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 51b .....43

Two of the Talmud’s sharpest minds face off in a battle of personal honor, learnedness and gender dynamics: Ullah, the perennial carrier of knowledge and rumors from land to land, and Yalta, the learned and sharp wife of R. Nachman. Ulla refuses to see in Yalta anything but an object, and she in response tries to reveal her opponent’s toxicity. The outcome of this tense encounter remains open to interpretation...

**Section III: Rome and Jerusalem: A Minority Culture Defines Its Space..... 45**

**11. Heresy or Not to Be: Eating the Fruit and Tossing the Peel**

Elisa Ben Avuyah | Talmud Bavli Hagiga 15a .....46

The renegade teacher and beloved student meet for the last time. As Elisha ben Avuyah, the Talmud’s favorite heretic, and his student Rabbi Meir take a Shabbat stroll, they raise the most tense theological and personal questions through thinly veiled halakhic discourse. At the end, they stand before a line only the two of them can see. One will cross it, the other will not.

**12. Rabban Gamliel Takes a Piss: Negotiating Public Space in a Multi-Cultural Society**

Mishna Avodah Zarah 3:4 .....48

How does a minority culture navigate resistance and accommodation within the hegemony? How did Jews manage watching their land turn into a pagan playground? In the middle of the bath house, a roman philosopher accosts Rabban Gamliel for bathing in Aphrodite’s bathhouse, the most Roman and pagan practice, surely forbidden by the Torah itself. But Rabban Gamliel refuses to give an inch, answering with four responses that each portray a different strategy of resistance, which some have defined as an attempt to carve out a neutral space within a multi-cultural society.

**13. The Ivory Tower, Plato’s Cave and the First Story of Tikkun Olam**

R. Shimon bar Yochai in the Cave   Talmud Bavli Shabbat 33b .....	49
<p>What is the life worth living? The life of contemplation or the life of action?  This ancient philosophical question is asked in the Talmud through the story of R. Shimon Bar Yochai, the seminal figure of Jewish mysticism, seclusion, and elitism – and the person who goes through numerous intense transformations as this story unfolds. With echoes of Elijah’s cave of zealotry, and Plato’s cave of reality and responsibility, this story’s multiple scenes also explore the significance of doing a “tikkun” in this world.</p>	
<b>14. The Tales of Destruction: Kamtza &amp; Bar Kamtza</b>	
Talmud Bavli Gittin 55b .....	58
<p>A mistaken identity, a recalcitrant host, and a reigning elite that has lost its moral foundations – these are only three of the factors that brought about the destruction of the Temple, or so this story claims.</p>	
<b>Section IV: Ids and Egos, Husbands and Wives</b> .....	60
<b>15. Desire and Authenticity: The Tzitzit and the Harlot</b>	
Talmud Bavli Gittin 55b .....	61
<p>Who am I really, and what is most important to me? Does sexual desire bring us farther away from the answers, or possibly closer to them? In this fantastical tale, an object of desire stands at the top of golden ladders, while a piece of cloth can fly and slap us in the face. In what might be the Talmudic reversal of Hollywood’s “Pretty Woman”, this story ends with the harlot riding back in shining armor to save the yeshiva student from his mundane life...</p>	
<b>16. Freedom, Intimacy and the Marital Bed: Heruta Seduces Her Husband</b>	
Talmud Bavli Gittin 55b .....	63
<p>Gender and feminist re-readings of our tradition have brought about some of the most profound insights into the intersection of our tradition and modern life. A gender reading of the Talmud's stories is especially juicy, since its authors were obsessed with that terrible yet necessary - or rather that terribly necessary - personality trait called The Yetzer, aka evil inclination. By examining the relationship between sexual desire and evil inclination, this story explores themes such as marital fatigue, marital communication, and marital tragedy.</p>	
<b>17. “Spit in My Eye”: the Wife, the Husband, and the Sermon Marriage Counseling</b>	
Talmud Bavli Gittin 55b .....	66
<p>A scholarly woman finds herself caught between a charismatic teacher and a jealous and forlorn husband. Is there a way to maintain both worlds and bring peace back to the household without giving up what is most important to each side?</p>	
<b>Epilogue: Entering and Exiting</b> .....	68
<b>18. Nehunia Ben HaKane – Entering and Exiting</b>	
Mishna Brachot 4:2 .....	69

In our closing text, we return to standing on the verge of the House of Study, entering and exiting, and make use of prayer as an opportunity to consider where we have been and where we are headed.