

Posted 12/18/95. Happy Hanukah!!

Before we leave Honi, and we will be leaving him for a different sort of passage, I thought we'd take a look at just one more parallel to the "Rip Van Winkle" story. This comes from Leviticus Rabbah. If I were to start studying midrash "whole", as it were, I'd start with this midrash collection. It is 36 essays that take priestly religion and "rabbinize" it, i.e., make priestly rituals into moral and ethical principles.

After the story is a special brief Talmud portion related to Hanukah!

The present example is a reinterpretation of the Holiness Code which demands that Israel be holy. In this essay (Leviticus Rabbah 25), this is interpreted as two hallmarks of Jewish distinctiveness: Torah study and circumcision. This is a fitting rabbinic reinterpretation of the Priestly Holiness Code which demands that Israel be holy (i.e., separate) because God is holy. The aggadah we will examine is an exposition of the following verse:

And when you shall come into the Land, and you shall plant all manner of trees for food, then you shall count the fruit thereof as forbidden; three years shall it be as forbidden unto you; it shall not be eaten. (Leviticus 19:23)

The exposition of this verse is as follows:

Hadrian, (his bones be ground to dust!) once passed along the paths leading to Tiberias and saw an old man standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig trees.

Said he to him: "Greybeard, greybeard! If you had got up early to do the work [when you were young] you would not have had to work late!

He answered to him: "I have worked early and am working late, and let the Lord of Heaven do as it pleases Him."

Said he to him: "By your life, old man! How old are you this day?"

"A hundred years old", he answered.

He said to him: "So you are a hundred years old, and yet are standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees! Do you ever hope to eat of them?"

He replied: "If I am worthy I shall eat, and if not, then as my forbearers have worked for me so will I work for my children."

He said to him: "On your life! If you are so privileged to eat of them, let me know."

In the course of time the trees produced figs.

Said he: "Now it is time to let the king know."

What did he do? He filled a basket with figs and went and stood at the gate of the palace.

He was asked: "What is your business here?"

He answered: "I want to come before the king."

When he came in the latter asked him: "What is your business?"

He answered him: "I am the old man whom you passed by as I was digging trenches to plant shoots of fig-trees, and you said to me: 'If you are privileged to eat of them let me know.' Lo, I have been so privileged and have eaten of them, and these figs are some of the fruit."

Thereupon Hadrian exclaimed: "I command that a chair of gold be set down and that he sit upon it." He further said: "I command that you empty this basket of his and fill it with denarii".

His servants said to him: "Will you show all this honor to that old Jew?"

He answered them: "His Creator honors him, and shall not I honor him too?"

Now the wife of the old man's neighbor was a woman of low character. She said to her husband: "O son of darkness! See how this king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii!" What did he do? He filled a haversack with figs and went and stood before the palace.

He was asked: "What is your business?"

He replied: "I heard that the king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii."

They went in and told the king: "A certain old man is standing at the palace gate carrying a haversack full of figs, and when we asked him: 'What is your business?' he replied, 'I heard the king loves figs and exchanges them for denarii'."

Said the king: "I command that you make him stand before the palace-gate and everyone who comes in or goes out shall throw a fig in his face."

Towards evening they cleared him off. He came home and said to his wife: "I shall pay you back in accordance with all the honor I got!"

She retorted: "Go and tell your mother the gladsome tidings that they were figs and not citrons, or that they were ripe and not hard!" (Leviticus Rabbah Kedoshim, 25:5)

Discussion Questions:

1. On the most basic level, compare this story with that of [Honi](#). What is the same? What is different?
2. How are Hadrian (a Roman ruler who was initially good to the Jews and then suppressed them harshly) and Honi similar? Dissimilar? Why are both associated with this sort of "tree planting" incident?
3. Who might the dishonest man represent? (Hint: Leviticus Rabbah was compiled around 400-500 C.E., i.e., after Christianity had clearly triumphed and become the religion of Rome.) Who might the dishonest man and his wife represent today? Who was the faithful planter for Leviticus Rabbah and who is the faithful planter today?

For Hannukkah, I thought we'd give you just a tiny bit of Talmud about the holiday to study. In fact, if you want to do more, this passage, B. Shabbat 21a-42a, is the place to learn what you need to know. This is just a taste to whet your appetite:

Our Rabbis taught: The precept of Hanukkah [demands] one light for a man and his household; the zealous [kindle] a light for each member [of the household]; and the extremely zealous--Beit Shammai say: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced but Beit Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased....[Why do they rule so?] Beit Shammai's reason is that it shall correspond to the bullocks of the Festival while Beit Hillel's reason is that we promote [in matters of] sanctity but do not reduce. (B. Shabbat 21b)

Some explanations:

On Sukkot, thirteen bullocks were offered on the first day, twelve on the second and so forth (Numbers 29:12 ff).

The law follows Beit Hillel, as you know, and we light one more candle each night. We follow the "extremely zealous" views these days and light increasing candles each night.

Some questions to think about. These aren't discussion questions exactly, but I'd love to hear your responses that I can share with your fellow learners.

1. Are you increasing holiness in your life? How? Does Talmud study have anything to do with this process? If so, what?
2. How does it feel to realize that you are "extremely zealous" in at least one mitzvah? Is it a surprise to you that you're an expert or extremely dedicated? Does it change your self-image at all? How?
3. What's light? What's enlightenment? How are these lights different from Shabbat lights? Havdalah lights? How are they the same?

Happy Hannukkah! And thank you for the gift of your continued discussions, energy and support!

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