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בס״ד

The Death and Rebirth of Rav: A Tale of Rabbinic Hazing

Gila Fine

1

Shmuel and Karna were sitting on the bank of the Malka River. They saw that the water was rising and was murky. Shmuel said to Karna, "A great man is arriving from the West, and his intestines are aching, and the water is rising to greet him. Go and gauge his worth."

So he went and found Rav. He said to him, "How do we know that tefillin maybe written only on the skin of a clean animal?" "Because it is written, 'that the Law of the Lord may be in thy mouth' (Ex. 13:9), of that which is permitted in thy mouth," he replied. "How do we know that blood is red?" he asked. "Because it is said, 'and the Moabites saw the water over against them as red as blood' (II Kings 3:22)." "How do we know that circumcision is in that place?" "'His *orlah*' (Lev. 12:3) is stated here, and 'its *orlah*' (Lev. 19:23) is stated elsewhere: just as there something that produces fruit, so here too something that produces fruit." "Perhaps it means the heart, for it is written, 'Circumcise therefore the foreskin [*orlat*] of your heart' (Deut. 10:16)? Perhaps it means the ear, for it is written, 'behold, their ear is uncircumcised [*arela*]' (Jer. 6:10)?" "We learn the complete *orlato* from the complete *orlato*, but we do not learn the complete *orlato* from *orlat*, which is incomplete." "What is your name?" he asked. "Karna." "May it be His will that a horn shall grow in his eyes." he retorted.

Subsequently Shmuel took him into his house, gave him barley bread and small fried fish to eat, and beer to drink, but did not show him the privy, so that he would suffer from diarrhea. Rav cursed, saying, "He who causes me suffering, let his children not survive." And so it was.

Shabbat 108a

שמואל וקרנא הוו יתבי אגודא דנהר מלכא, חזונהו למיא דקא דאלו ועכירי. אמר ליה שמואל לקרנא: גברא רבה קא אתי [ממערבא], וחייש במעיה, וקא דאלו מיא לאקבולי אפיה. זיל תהא ליה בקנקניה. אזל ונפק לאפיה ואשכחיה לרב. אמר ליה: מניין שאין כותבין תפילין אלא על גבי עור בהמה טהורה בלבד? אמר ליה: דכתיב ״למען תהיה תורת ה׳ בפיך״ – מן המותר בפיך; מנין לדם שהוא אדום? שנאמר ״ויראו מואב מנגד את המים אדומים כדם״; מניין למילה שבאותו מקום? נאמר כאן ״ערלתו״ ונאמר להלן ״ערלתו״, מה להלן דבר שעושה פרי אף כאן דבר שעושה פרי; ואימא לבו, דהא כתיב ״ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם״, ואימא אזנו, כדכתיב ״הנה ערלה אזנם״? דנין ערלתו תמה מערלתו תמה, ואין דנין ערלתו שאינה תמה ערלתו תמה [ערלתו תמה מערלת שאינה תמה]. אמר ליה: מאי שמך? קרנא. אמר ליה: יהא רעוא דתיפוק ליה קרנא בעינך. לסוף עייליה שמואל לבנייתיה. אוכליה נהמא דשערי [בהרסנא], ואשקייה שיכרא, ולא אחוי ליה בית הכסא, סבר כי היכי דלישתלשל. לייט רב ואמר: על דצערן [מאן דמצערן], לא ליקיימו [לוקמוה] ליה בני. וכן הוה.

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2

Rav and Shmuel and R. Assi once met at a circumcision… Rav would not enter before Shmuel… paying a compliment to Shmuel, to make up for the [regrettable] occasion when a curse against him, escaped his lips.

Bava Kama 80b

רב ושמואל ורב אסי איקלעו לבי שבוע הבן... רב לא עייל קמיה דשמואל... משום ההוא מעשה דלטייה אדבריה רב עליה.

3

[Shmuel] said unto [Karna]: Is your name Karna? Let a horn grow out of your eye. A horn, [consequently] grew out of his eye.

Bava Batra 89a

א״ל [שמואל לקרנא]: מה שמך?—קרנא. תיפוק ליה קרנא בעיניה. נפקא ליה קרנא בעיניה.

4

"Our Rabbis in Babylon" refers to Rav and Shmuel.

Sanhedrin 17b

״רבותינו שבבבל״—רב ושמואל.

Rav is a *tanna* and is privileged to differ.

Eiruvin 50b

רב תנא הוא ופליג.

It was at the school of Rav that Jewish learning in Babylon found its permanent home and center. Rav's activity made Babylon independent of Palestine, and gave it that predominant position which it was destined to occupy for several centuries.

"Abba Arika," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*

5

The great authority enjoyed by Shmuel's bet din was entirely owing to his prestige…. [He] was close to the exilarch and his officials… and would sit in front of Mar Ukva, the exilarch, when the latter judged a case. He was also personally acquainted with Sapor, the king.

"Samuel," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*

R. Yehuda stated in the name of Shmuel: As it is forbidden to leave the Land of Israel for Babylon so it is forbidden to leave Babylon for other countries.

Ktubot 111a

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל כשם שאסור לצאת מארץ ישראל לבבל כך אסור לצאת מבבל לשאר ארצות.

"The judges of the Diaspora" [refers] to Shmuel and Karna.

Sanhedrin 17b

״דייני גולה״—שמואל וקרנא.

Shmuel also showed deference to Rav, and it was Rav who of his own accord paid him special honor.

Megilla 22a

שמואל נמי מיכף הוה כייף ליה לרב ורב הוא דעבד ליה כבוד.

6

Karna… was [regularly occupied in] smelling tests at a wine store.

Ktubot 105a

קרנא הוה שקיל דהוה תהי באמברא דחמרא.

7

The decisive thrust toward the development of a Jewish spiritual center in Babylon was provided by Rav, who returned to Babylon from Israel during the final days of Rebbi.

Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Carta Atlas of the Period of the Second Temple*

8

The fear of *aliya bachoma* [forcible aliya] is a diasporic tradition, and was especially denounced in Israel. On the other hand, the sages of the Diaspora would sometimes protest against the Israeli sages' tendency to dismiss their peers who had immigrated to Israel (and denounce those who remained in the Diaspora as "fools [who] misinterpret the law" (PT Bava Batra 16a).

Saul Lieberman, "Thus It Was and Thus It Will Be"

9

[The young] Kahana was a prodigy. When he arrived here, a blackguard saw him and said to him, "What did you hear up in heaven?" He said to him, "Your fate is sealed." And so it was. He died…. He said, "What is this? I came here to gain merit. And now I have sinned. Did I come here to kill inhabitants of the Land of Israel? I must go back whence I came." He went before R. Yohanan. He said to him, "Where should a person go whose mother mocks him and whose stepmother honors him?" He said to him, "He should go to whomever honors him," So Kahanan went back to whence he came ….

When R. Zeira came here, he went… to buy a liter of meat from the butcher. He said to him, "How much is this liter?" He said to him, "Fifty coins and one blow with an iron." He said to him, "Take sixty and spare me the blow. Take seventy and spare me the blow. Take eighty and spare me the blow. Take ninety and spare me the blow." He got as far as "Take one hundred and spare me the blow." He said to him, "Do as you are accustomed."….

When R. Issa came here, he went to get a haircut…. He met a scoffer who smacked him on the head with a staff.

PT Brakhot 20b

כהנא הוה עולם סגין כד סליק להכא חמתיה חד בר פחין. א״ל מה קלא בשמיא. א״ל גזר דיניה דההוא גברא מיחתם וכן הוות ליה. אמר מה סליקית מזכי ואנא איחטי מה סליקית למיקטלה בני ארעא דישראל ניזול וניחות לי מן הן דסליקית. אתא לגבי ר׳ יוחנן א״ל בר נש דאימיה מבסרא ליה ואיתתיה דאבוהי מוקרא ליה להן ייזול ליה א״ל ייזול להן דמוקרין ליה. נחת ליה כהנא מן הן דסלק... ר׳ זעירא כד סלק להכא אזל אקיז דם אזל בעי מיזבון חדא ליטרא דקופד מן טבחא. א״ל בכמה הדין ליטרתא א״ל בחמשין מניי וחד קורסם. א״ל סב לך שיתין ולא קביל עילוי. סב לך ע׳ ולא קביל עילוי. סב לך פ׳ סב לך צ׳ עד דמטא מאה ולא קביל עילוי. א״ל עביד כמנהגך... ר׳ יסא כד סליק להכא אזל סבר בעי מסחי באהן דימוסן דטיבריא. פגע ביה חד ליצן ויהב ליה פורקדל חד.

10

The *aliya* tales of the Jerusalem Talmud recount the trials and tribulations of the important Babylonian immigrants who… found themselves in embarrassing situations, as the locals tease, taunt, and torment them to death.

Shmuel Faust, *Agadata: Stories of Talmudic Drama*

11

When R. Zera immigrated to Israel, he fasted a hundred fasts to forget the Babylonian Talmud, that it should not trouble him.

Bava Metzia 85b

ר׳ זירא כאשר עלה לארץ ישראל ישב מאה תעניות שישתכח התלמוד הבבלי ממנו כדי שלא יטריד אותו.

This law was unknown to the Elders of Beteira. It happened that the 14th [of Nisan] fell on a Shabbat and they did not know if the Passover sacrifice overrides the Shabbat or not. They said, "There is here a certain Babylonian whose name is Hillel who studied with Shemaya and Avtalion and knows if the Passover sacrifice overrides the Shabbat or not. Perhaps he can he be of some use." They sent to seek him... He started to explicate by means of *hekesh*, and *kal vachomer*, and *gezera shava*… Although he sat and explicated all the day, they did not accept from him until he said, "This is what I received from Shemaya and Avtalion." When they had heard that, they stood up and appointed him patriarch.

PT Psachim 39a

זו הלכה נעלמה מזקני בתירה פעם אחת חל ארבעה עשר להיות שבת ולא היו יודעין אם פסח דוחה את השב׳ אם לאו אמרו יש כאן בבלי אחד והלל שמו ששימש את שמעיה ואבטליון יודע אם פסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו איפשר שיש ממנו תוחלת שלחו וקראו לו... התחיל דרוש להן מהיקש ומקל וחומר ומגזירה שוה מהיקש... אע״פ שהיה יושב ודורש להן כל היום לא קיבלו ממנו עד שאמר להן יבוא עלי כך שמעתי משמעיה ואבטליון כיון ששמעו ממנו כן עמדו ומינו אותו נשיא עליהן.

12

Rather any illness, but not an intestinal illness.

Shabbat 11a.

כל חולי ולא חולי מעיים.

Three kinds of person do not see the face of Gehenna [because of their extreme suffering in this world]: one who suffers from oppressive poverty, *one who is afflicted with bowel diseases*, and one who is in the hands of the government.

Eiruvin 41b

אין רואין פני גיהנם אלו הן דקדוקי עניות וחולי מעיין והרשות.

There are three types of bad [tears]: of smoke, and of weeping, and *of the privy*.

Lamentations Rabba 2:15

ג׳ דמעות רעות דמעת העשן ודמעת הבכיה ודמעת בית הכסא.

For Chazal, "intestinal illness" [חולי מעיים] includes many kinds of digestive disorders, but refers primarily to diarrhea.

Avraham Steinberg, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Medical Ethics*

Shmuel said: A change in one's lifestyle is the beginning of intestinal illness.

Nedarim 37b

כדאמר שמואל שינוי וסת תחילת חולי מעיים.

13

"Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy?... He who has a privy near his table."

Shabbat 25b

מר זוטרא אמר "לעת מצא" (תהלים לב, ו) זה בית הכסא.

Mar Zutra said: "In the time of finding" (Ps. 32:6) refers to the [finding of a] privy.

Brakhot 8a

"ברוך אתה בעיר" (דברים כח, ג) שיהא בית הכסא סמוך לשולחנך.

Said R. Judah b. R. Ila'i… There are twenty-four privies between my lodging and the beit hamidrash, and when I go there I test myself in all of them.

Brakhot 55a

אמר [ר' יהודה בר' עילאי]... עשרים וארבעה בית הכסא איכא מאושפיזאי לבי מדרשא דכי אזילנא בדיקנא נפשאי בכולהו.

[The Talmud's many references to the privy indicate] the importance one ascribed to the unhindered ability to relieve oneself for the body's wellbeing

Julius Preus, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*

14

As Shmuel was an expert physician, he said to Karna, "Go and gauge his worth," i.e., see if he is wise and worthy of honor; I will bring him to my home and cure him and honor him as is his due.

R. Hai Gaon, *ad loc.*

Did not show him the privy. Causing the waste within his intestines to turn and dilute and disintegrate entirely.

Rashi, *ad loc.*

15

If a man wants to avoid stomach trouble, he should take *tibbul* regularly summer and winter… and do not wait too long to relieve yourself.

Gittin 70a

תני ר' חייא הרוצה שלא יבא לידי חולי מעיים יהא רגיל בטיבול קיץ וחורף... ואל תשהה עצמך בשעה שאתה צריך לנקביך.

16

Shmuel had already heard that a great man was arriving from Israel that day, and as he saw that the water was murky, he knew that man could not but have drank from them, and it is well known that anyone who drinks from those murky waters contract intestinal illness.

R. Hai Gaon, *ad loc.*

To greet him [Rav]. To shield him from his surroundings as he turns to the railings of the ship, so that he will not be exposed. *Murky*. Because of his grief, as he too was murky.

Rashi, *ad loc.*

17

The town mentioned by Josephus as Nearda appears in the Babylonian Talmud as Neharde'a, repeatedly named as one of the main centres of the Jewish exile…. In the Babylonian Talmud it appears as one of the last settlements of Babylonia on the road to Syria, and was enclosed not only by the Euphrates but also by a reach of the celebrated Royal Canal. That channel, in Aramaic *Nehar Malka*, carried water *eastward* from the Euphrates to irrigate areas round Seleucia and discharge into the Tigris.

E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*

18

My concern here is with… the presence of narratives that not only celebrate the lower body but actively portray the rabbis, the very heroes of the Talmud, in grotesque, compromising, or ethically problematic light…. [T]he Babylonian Talmud can be better understood when it is considered part and parcel of the menippea or carnivalistic legend tradition of its world. Bakhtin has already laid out the taxa of this type of literature… saying that "Carnivalistic legends in general are profoundly different from traditional heroicizing epic legends: carnivalistic legends debase the hero and bring him down to earth, they make him familiar, bring him close, humanize him…." This could almost have been written as a description of the biographical legend that is found in rabbinic literature but most vividly in the Babylonian Talmud. We will find our rabbinic heroes in all their bodily glory and mess, all of their selfishness and meanness and not infrequently in extreme and untoward situations.

Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*

19

[In narratives of grotesque realism] the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role.

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity…. [G]rotesque realism degrades, brings down to earth, turns its subject into flesh. This is the peculiar trait of this genre which differentiates it from all the forms of medieval high art and literature. The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum….

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world… The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation….

Finally the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses. The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque. Abuse exercises a direct influence on the language and the images of this literature and is closely related to all other forms of "degradation" and "down to earth" in grotesque and Renaissance literature….

Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better…. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

20

All human bodies are carriers; happy are they who are worthy of being carriers of the Torah.

Sanhedrin 99b

דאמר רבא כולהו גופי דרופתקי נינהו טובי לדזכי דהוי דרופתקי דאורייתא.

When are the words of the Torah "pleasant"? When thou keepest them within thy stomach.

Eiruvin 54a

א״ר אמי... אימתי דברי תורה נעימים בזמן שתשמרם בבטנך.

Whoever honors the Torah, his body is honored by others; and whoever dishonors the Torah, his body is dishonored by others.

Avot 4:6

רבי יוסי אומר, כל המכבד את התורה, גופו מכובד על הבריות ; וכל המחלל את התורה, גופו מחולל על הבריות.

21

[R]ites of passage or "transition" are… frequently likened to death…. [N]eophytes… have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.

Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*

22

Repentance… is an act of creation—self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals—this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future…. "Among the ways of teshuva etc. he changes his name, as if to say "I am another; I am not that same person who did those deeds'" [Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 2:4]…. When man repents, he becomes a creator of worlds and a creator of self.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*

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