

Jerusalem Talmud, Yebamot 69a, 12:6

Deuteronomy 25:5-10

5) When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her; he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. 6) The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. 7) But if the man does not want to marry his brother's widow, his brother's widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, "My husband's brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir." 8) The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, "I do not want to marry her," 9) his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: "Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house!" 10) And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one."

Jerusalem Talmud, Yebamot 69a, 12:6

"She spit blood." Rabbi Ba in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Zerikan caused [the chain of tradition] to arrive; Rabbi Yermiyah in the name of Abba bar Abba, Rabbi Zeira caused [the chain of tradition] to arrive in the name of Shmuel: If there is a drop of spit within it, it is valid.

A woman without arms, how does she perform *halitzah*? With her teeth.

The people of Simonia came to Rabbi (Judah the Prince) and said: "Give us one person who will be a preacher, a judge, a *hazzan*, a teacher of Bible and Mishnah, and will fulfill all our needs." He gave them Levi bar Sisi.

They made him a large platform and sat him upon it. They came and asked him: "How does an armless woman perform *halitzah*?" He did not answer them. "[What is the law in the case of] a woman who spat blood?" He did not answer them.

They said: Perhaps he is not a master of law. Let us ask him about lore. They came and asked him: "What is [the correct interpretation of] that which is written: *But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book, in truth* (Dan. 10:21). If it is truth, why is it described as inscribed? And if it is inscribed, why is it described as truth?" He did not answer them.

They went back to Rabbi and said: "Is this the sort of leader we wanted?" He said: "[I swear] by your lives, I have given you a person like myself!"

Rabbi then called Levi bar Sisi and summoned him and asked him. He said to him: "If the woman spit blood, what is the law?" He answered him: "If there is a drop of spit in it, it is valid." "A woman without arms – how does she perform *halitzah*?" He said to him: "With her teeth."

He said to him: “What is the meaning of the following verse, as it is written, *But I will tell you what is inscribed (רְשׁוּמָה) in the book, in truth (Dan. 10:21)?* If it is truth, why is it described as inscribed? And if it is inscribed, why is it described as truth?” He said to him: “Before a decree is sealed, it is described as inscribed. Once it is sealed, it is described as truth.”

He (Rabbi) said to him (Levi bar Sisi): “Why did you not answer the people of the village?” He said to him: “They made me a large platform and sat me upon it, and my spirit (ego) swelled.”

Rabbi applied the verse to him *If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth (Proverbs 30:32).* What caused you to make a fool of yourself in regard to teaching of Torah? It was because you exalted yourself through them.

Bereshit Rabbah 81:2

If you have been scandalously arrogant (גִּבּוֹרֵת) (Prov. 30:32). Ben Azzai and R. Akiba discuss this. Ben Azzai interpreted: If you have humbled yourself over words of Torah, you will eventually be exalted in them. *If you have been a schemer (זִמְיוֹתָ), then clap your hand to your mouth (ib.).* If words [of slander] are devised against you *then clap your hand to your mouth.* One knows, but not two. Rabbi Akiba interpreted, What caused you to become lowered in the words of the Torah? Because you exalted yourself in respect of them.

Our Teacher was passing Simonia when the people of Simonia came out to meet him and requested him, saying, “Rabbi, give us a man to teach us Scripture and Mishnah and be our judge.” He gave them Levi ben Sisi.

They erected a great platform and set him upon it, but he forgot some of his learning. They asked him three questions: How can a woman with stumped fingers perform *halitzah*? He could not answer them. What if the *yabamah* spat blood? He could not answer them.

Perhaps he is a master of aggadah, they thought. So they questioned him on Biblical texts: What is meant by the verse, *But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book, in truth (Dan. 10:21)?* If *truth*, why *inscribed*, and if *inscribed*, why *truth*? He could not answer them.

When he saw in what a sorry plight he was, he arose early in the morning and returned to our Teacher. He said, “What did the people of Simonia do to you?” He said, “Do not remind me of my troubles. They asked me three questions, and I could not answer them.” “And what were they?” He said, “With what does a stumped woman perform *halitzah*?” “And you could not answer this?” “Even with her teeth or any other limb of her body.” “Again, what if a *yebamah* spat blood?” “And could you really not answer it?” He said,

“If it contained a speck of saliva the action is valid, and if not, it is invalid. Further, *what is inscribed in the book, in truth*. If *truth*, why *inscribed*, and if *inscribed*, why *truth*?”
“And you could not answer it?” He said, It is inscribed before the decree [is sealed], it is truth once it has been definitely decreed.”

What is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He? *Emet* (truth). Rabbi Bibi in the name of R. Reuven, Why *emet*? Said R. Simeon b. Lakish: *Alef* is the first of the letters [of the alphabet], *taf* the last of the letters, *mem* in the middle, thus it corresponds to, *I am the first and I am the last, and there is no god but Me* (Isa. 44:6). “Then why did you not answer them as you have answered me?” He said, “they erected a great platform for me and set me upon it, and that made me conceited and so I forgot my learning.”

Thereupon he applied to him this verse, *If you have been scandalously arrogant*.

Outline of Jerusalem Talmud, Yebamot 69a, 12:6

- A) Halakhic opening: Two arcane halakhic issues
 - 1. Spit blood – chain of tradition then halakhic answer
 - 2. *Halitzah* of an armless woman – anonymous answer
- B) Aggadic section
 - 1. Simonia's rabbinical search
 - a. Communal statement of desire for leadership
 - b. Enumeration of perceived roles of a rabbi
 - c. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's (Rabbi, henceforth) placement of Levi Bar Sisi
 - 2. The Test
 - a. People of Simonia sit Levi on a large platform
 - b. Question on "spit blood"
 - c. Levi's failure to answer
 - d. Question on "armless woman's *halitzah*"
 - e. Levi's failure to answer
 - f. Community adjusts its expectations (=Levi's last chance)
 - g. Question on Daniel 10:21 – truth and inscriptions/impressions
 - h. Levi's failure to answer
 - i. People of Simonia complain to Rabbi
 - j. Rabbi exclaims that Levi is just like him
 - 3. The Retest
 - a. Rabbi summons Levi and asks him three questions
 - i. Spit blood – Levi answers correctly
 - ii. Armless woman – Levi answers correctly
 - iii. Daniel 10:21 (truth and impressions) – Levi answers correctly
 - 4. Reflection
 - a. Rabbi asks why Levi did not answer the people
 - b. Levi answers: They made me a large platform and sat me on it, and my spirit swelled
 - 5. Conclusion/Moral Learning
 - a. Rabbi applies Proverbs 30:32 to Levi, to teach lesson
 - i. *If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or have been devising evil, put your hand to your mouth*
 - b. Lesson: If you use Torah to exalt yourself, you will look like a fool in the end

| <i>Text</i> | <i>Context</i> | <i>Subtext</i> |
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| | Halakhic Section (A) | |
| “She spit blood” (A1) | Arcane, perhaps even hypothetical halakhic topic, values halakhic thinking, interprets unclear or incomplete base texts and sets law | Rabbis’ ability to function when confronted with complex, challenging, irregular questions |
| Rabbi Ba ... in the name of Shmuel (A1) | Rabbinic respect for and preservation of chain of tradition and transmission, retains source of halakhic reasoning to allow evaluation | Place of contemporary rabbis within that chain of tradition, transmission and innovation; how to evaluate prior links in that chain |
| <i>Halitzah</i> of woman without arms (A2) | Second arcane, perhaps hypothetical halakhic topic | Feminist concerns, issues of powerlessness and treatment of those with disabilities |
| | Aggadic Section (B) | |
| Simonia’s desire for rabbinical leadership (B1a) | Community’s stated desire for rabbinical leadership, and inherent validation of rabbinical leadership | Contemporary relationship between rabbi and community, evaluation of communal willingness to be led and personal abilities |
| Simonia’s expression of perceived communal needs (B1b) | Communal expression of perceived roles of rabbinical leadership during Tannaitic period | Contemporary roles of the rabbi – acceptable, appropriate, achievable? |
| שירד Preacher (B1b) | Interpreter of Scripture, speaker in public settings, represents authentic interpretation | Torah knowledge, aptitude for interpretation, public speaking skills, authenticity |
| דיין Judge (B1b) | Response to actual court cases brought before communal rabbinical leader | Judgment, mediation, decision-making, management |
| הזן <i>Hazzan</i> (B1b) | Sexton – official who managed service/worship | Understanding of music/art/ other affective and inspirational aspects of Judaism |

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| ספר Scribe/Bible teacher (B1b) | Teacher of Bible to children | Pedagogy, approach to diverse educational audiences, text knowledge |
| מתניין Teacher of Tannaitic tradition (B1b) | Teacher of Tannaitic tradition | Extension of teaching past Bible to broad whole of Jewish tradition |
| ועבר לן כל צורכין Will meet all our needs (B1b) | Multi-faceted and not completely defined list of needs | “Other tasks as assigned;” how to define anew the role of the rabbi in contemporary Jewish society; responding to panoply of needs |
| Rabbi’s placement of Levi Bar Sisi (B1c) | Authority of rabbi, power over his students | Rabbinical placement system; control over own destiny in career |
| The Platform (B2a) | Levi’s elevation, physically and status-wise | Contemporary respect for the rabbi; fishbowl |
| The Test (B2b-h) | Examination of suitability of Levi Bar Sisi for leadership position; silence in the face of questioning; powerlessness | Meeting or exceeding expectations; failure; evaluation by non-professionals; truth vs. impression |
| The Complaint (B2i-j) | Surprise, disappointment of failure, Rabbi’s denial of problem as Levi is “just like him,” one of his students | Dealing with failure of colleagues and students; denial of difficulty, pride; community vs. rabbi; professional reviews |
| The Retest (B3) | Proof of Rabbi’s position and Levi’s suitability | Poor performance under pressure, action vs. inaction at key moments that matter |
| Reflection (B4) | Rabbi probes Levi’s difficulty, discovers his large platform problem | Seeking guidance from experienced colleagues, elders; self-reflection after failure |
| Conclusion/Moral Learning (B5) | Verse as appropriate medium for teaching moral lesson, humility above all | Use of tradition at “teachable moments;” humility in a modern context; avoiding use of position or Torah to self-aggrandize |