

# RABBIS BEHAVING BADLY?

## *TEBH Minyan Talmud Study*

The Talmud is mostly devoted to detailed analysis of fine points of *halakha*. Inserted between the legal debates are stories that illustrate the legal principle or teach a lesson about how people should treat each other. The stories often make one of the rabbis a central character. They were real people, both in the sense they are not fictional characters and in the sense they had flaws and made mistakes just like us. Often the Talmud will not explicitly say whether the actions of the rabbi in question were appropriate or not.

In the following examples, do you think the sage acted properly? Why or why not?

This first excerpt is from the tractate dealing with blessings, and describes an incident involving Bar Kappara, a Talmudist of the late 2nd and early 3rd century CE and a student of R' [Judah haNasi](#) (who redacted the Mishna). He was known for his [satirical wit](#), but at some point it so offended his teacher it lost him the chance to be [ordained](#).

### **Berakhot 39a**

**Two students were sitting before bar Kappara when cooked cabbage, cooked Damascene plums and pullets were set before him. Bar Kappara gave one of the students permission to recite a blessing. He hurried and recited a blessing over the pullets and his counterpart ridiculed him for gluttonously reciting the blessing that should have been recited later, first. Bar Kappara became angry with both of them, he said: I am not angry with the one who recited the blessing, but at the one who ridiculed him. If your counterpart is like one who never tasted the flavor of meat and was therefore partial to the pullet, and hurriedly ate it, why did you ridicule him? Bar Kappara continued and said to the second student: I am not upset at the one who ridiculed him, rather it is with the one who recited the blessing that I am angry. And he said: If there is no wisdom here, is there no elder here? If you are uncertain which blessing to recite first, couldn't you have asked me, as I am an elder?**

**The Gemara concludes that it was taught: And both of them did not live out his year. Due to bar Kappara's anger they were punished, and both died within the year.**

This next excerpt, also from the tractate on blessings, tells the story of Ulla, a rabbi from Israel who frequently travelled to Babylonia to teach. Here he is the guest at the house of Rav Nahman and gets in trouble with his host's wife.

### **Berakhot 51b**

**The Gemara relates: Ulla happened to come to the house of Rav Naḥman. He ate bread, recited Grace after Meals, and gave the cup of blessing to Rav Naḥman. Rav Naḥman said to him: Master, please send the cup of blessing to Yalta, my wife. Ulla responded to him: There is no need, as Rabbi Yoḥanan said as follows: The fruit of a woman's body is blessed only from the fruit of a man's body, as it is stated: "And He will love you, and bless you, and make you numerous, and He will bless the fruit of your body" (Deuteronomy 7:13). The Gemara infers: "He will bless the fruit of her body" was not stated. Rather, "He will bless the fruit of your [masculine singular] body." For his wife to be blessed with children, it is sufficient to give the cup to Rav Naḥman.**

**The Gemara relates that meanwhile Yalta heard Ulla's refusal to send her the cup of blessing. Yalta was the daughter of the Exilarch and was accustomed to being treated with deference, so she arose in a rage, entered the wine-storage, and broke four hundred barrels of wine. Afterward, Rav Naḥman said to Ulla: Let the Master send her another cup. Ulla sent Yalta a different cup with a message saying that all of the wine in this barrel is wine of blessing; although you did not drink from the cup of blessing itself, you may at least drink from the barrel from which the cup of blessing was poured. She sent him a stinging response: From itinerant peddlers, come meaningless words, and from rags come lice.**

This next excerpt comes from the tractate on Shabbat. It describes an incident concerning the death of a Torah student and how his wife challenged the rabbis to explain why God would permit such a thing. She is rebuked by someone called Eliyahu. This was either the prophet himself (who the rabbis believed did not die but continues to serve as an emissary of God) or a sage of the same name from the Second Temple period.

### **Shabbat 13 a, b**

**There was an incident involving one student who studied much Mishna and read much Bible, and served Torah scholars extensively, studying Torah from them, and, nevertheless, died at half his days, half his life expectancy. His wife in her bitterness would take his phylacteries and go around with them to synagogues and study halls, and she said to the Sages: It is written in the Torah: “For it is your life and the length of your days” (Deuteronomy 30:20). If so, my husband who studied much Mishna, and read much Bible, and served Torah scholars extensively, why did he die at half his days? Where is the length of days promised him in the verse? No one would respond to her astonishment at all. Eliyahu said: One time I was a guest in her house, and she was relating that entire event with regard to the death of her husband. And I said to her: My daughter, during the period of your menstruation, how did he act toward you? She said to me: Heaven forbid, he did not touch me even with his little finger. And I asked her: In the days of your white garments, after the menstrual flow ended, and you were just counting clean days, how did he act toward you then? She said to me: He ate with me, and drank with me, and slept with me with bodily contact and, however, it did not enter his mind about something else, i.e., conjugal relations. And I said to her: Blessed is the Omnipresent who killed him for this sin, as your husband did not show respect to the Torah. The Torah said: “And to a woman in the separation of her impurity you should not approach” (Leviticus 18:19), even mere affectionate contact is prohibited.**