

Class 3: Return

Rabbi Hama bar Bisa went and sat for twelve years in the study house.

When he planned to return home, he said: “I will not do what Ben Hakinai did.”

He stopped at the local study house and sent a letter to his wife.

Rabbi Oshaya, his son, came and sat before him [but Rabbi Hama bar Bisa did not recognize him].

He asked him questions of law.

Rabbi Hama bar Bisa saw that he was a brilliant student, and grew faint.

He said: If I had stayed here, I could have had a son like this.

He went home.

Rabbi Oshaya entered behind him.

Rabbi Hama bar Bisa stood before him, thinking: He is surely coming to ask me another question of law.

His wife said to him: Does a father stand before his child?

—B. Ketubot 62b

How long had he been away? Twelve Passover seders; two times twelve celebrations upon completing a tractate of the Talmud; twelve spring terms and another twelve fall terms. There were ” “other ways, too, of

measuring his days in the study house: thirty-six pairs of shoes from the cobbler, hundreds of Shabbat meals at the homes of strangers, and thousands of simple lentil dinners during the week. For twelve years he had lived in an inn, lacking a real home.

Rabbi Hama bar Bisa's memories of home were a series of dream scenes: his wife's eyes, the little toddler always underfoot, the two rooms behind the yard of his father's home. At the time the chance to leave home and study in a talmudic academy far away had beckoned invitingly, so he set off. In the first few years he would write letters home. But after a while it was hard for him to do even that. He found refuge in the routines of daily learning. From time to time he found himself in the arms of strange women. He thought of his son often and took comfort in these memories. At first they had expected that Rabbi Hama bar Bisa would be a great scholar, but he did not have his father's brilliance. He mastered what he was taught, but he did not stand out. He calmly absorbed[...]" "clear that he would not be asked to stay and teach. The bright dreams of his youth had faded into a lackluster reality. In the last few years he was drawn less to the talmudic page and more to the interesting scenes out the window: a father teaching his trade to his son; a man chatting with his wife; a bridge being built over the river.

His fellow students began returning home to teach and serve as leaders in their local communities, some of them already accompanied by a legion of students of their own. But no students flocked to Rabbi Hama. He was a bit jealous, and his jealousy was tinged with regret about the son he had left at home with no father to teach him the alphabet, let alone Torah and Mishnah.

When he finally decided to return home, he did so slowly and methodically, as was his nature. First, he asked permission from the head of the academy, who bestowed his blessing with alacrity, giving Rabbi Hama pause to wonder about what he had not become. He finished the passage they were learning, and he took his leave from his fellow students as well as[...]"

"years had passed like a dream. In his final month he walked the familiar roads like a ghost, as if he had already departed.

The journey, which had seemed so long when he came, seemed shorter on his return. He was surprised to realize that it was not so far; he could have returned home at least once or twice over the course of the past twelve years. Each time he would pass a young man chopping wood or

driving a wagon or selling fruit, he thought of his own son. Had his boy learned a trade? Did he know how to sign his name?

The rumors about Ben Hakinai, a fellow scholar in the academy who had frightened his wife to death when he returned home without warning after many years away, had spread among his fellow students. When he approached the hills that surrounded his village, Rabbi Hama was preoccupied by that horrible scene: “She lifted her eyes, her heart saw him, and her soul escaped.”

He had resolved that he would not do what Ben Hakinai had done. A written note was all ready, waiting between his folded clothes. His wife knew how to read the[...]”“moon, which had to be legible even at night, he had written, “Coming home, in blessing and peace,” and had signed, “Rabbi Hama.” His wife would prepare the home in his honor: A candle would be lit, and the table would be set as befits a man of Torah. He smiled to himself. He was flooded with a sense of pure and total happiness. His legs carried him over the hills to the village, as if the road were gliding underneath his feet.

As planned, he did not go home immediately but turned first into the small local study house. There, as a child, he used to sit on the bench attentively and dream of becoming an important scholar like those who

visited from afar, like his father. Now he sat waiting until he could be sure that his letter had reached home. Then someone approached him, and he was jolted out of his reveries. A local student recognized his cloak, the type of cloak worn by those who study in the distant academies. The boy greeted him with words of blessing and sat down before him. Rabbi Hama was pleased to see this young man eager to learn[...]" "preamble, rushed into questions from a chapter in the tractate of the Talmud that deals with property damage.

The young student was well versed in the details of the law, and his thoughts were well organized. He repeated the complicated passage from memory: "A pipe irrigates the yard of a neighbor. The owner of the roof where the pipe originates comes to close off the pipe. The owner of the yard stops him, reasoning: Just as you have a right to my garden as a place to spill your water, so too do I have a right to the water from your roof as a way to irrigate my garden." He paused, and the expression on his face bespoke calmness and command. It seemed to Rabbi Hama bar Bisa that he was among the finest students in Babylonia.

The man said, "We hold that he has the right to stop his neighbor from closing off the pipe. What do you hold?" he asked Rabbi Hama with rapt attention. Rabbi Hama tried to answer, but he could not. The passage did

not register in his mind; his swarming thoughts impeded his concentration. “If only I had stayed here,” he thought[...]”“preamble, rushed into questions from a chapter in the tractate of the Talmud that deals with property damage.

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disturbed by a vague memory. His father, he recalled, had ruled that the man could indeed stop his neighbor, as had the young boy.¹

The time for the afternoon prayer passed while they were absorbed in intense study. The student did not leave him alone, like a hungry man who seizes upon a hot loaf of bread. The teachings of Rabbi Hama helped the young student sort out parts of the picture. Some arguments were new to him entirely, and some shed new light on what he already knew. Something of the discomfort that was always there between Rabbi Hama and his father was present, too, between Rabbi Hama and the young student. A sense of self-doubt nestled uncomfortably in Rabbi Hama's heart. When they eventually stood to pray the afternoon prayer, he saw that the student was taller than he was. The student moved lithely and prayed fervently, his legs planted in the ground and his eyes tightly shut. Rabbi Hama remembered his home, a place of rest and of shelter. His feet hurt from the journey. He finished praying quickly and[...]”“blessing but looked at him quizzically, as if trying to remember why his face seemed so familiar.

He came to the small alley where his house stood, painted an inviting shade of blue. The pathway in the yard had recently been washed, and the pleasant smell of fresh leaves hung in the air.

Rabbi Hama, flushed with emotion, cried out in greeting and opened the door. Careful not to rush in too suddenly, he hesitated on the threshold for another second. His fear was dispelled by the familiar sound of his wife's voice. His eyes, which had still not adjusted to the darkness in the home, were greeted by a figure in a brightly colored robe. He was surprised that he had forgotten how beautiful she was, how freely her body flowed when she walked. He was so happy that he had come home! They looked at one another and did not speak. He enjoyed the silence. He sat by the table, the oil lamp lit as on Shabbat and the table laid out for two as it had been each day before he left. He turned to wash his hands and to freshen his face from the journey[...]" "When he returned to the room and came to sit by the table, the bright student whom he had met earlier in the local study house entered. Rabbi Hama was taken aback. He realized that the student had probably come to ask him more questions, and he was not thrilled about resuming their conversation, especially not in front of his wife. Still, he felt that he had no choice but to stand up out of respect for the student and his breadth of knowledge. A long moment of silence passed, until he heard the voice of his wife tinged with a trace of irony and bitterness. "Since when does a father rise before his own child?" He slowly lifted his eyes and gazed at his son,

who was sitting at the table holding the cup of wine, looking very much at home.

Reflections on the Story

The story of Rabbi Hama bar Bisa echoes the tragedy of Rabbi Hanania ben Hakinai. The two stories follow one another in the Babylonian Talmud (Ketubot 61-62). Ben Hakinai, a scholar who married and then left home for thirteen years, returned suddenly after years of estrangement. The roads of his hometown seemed[...]”“playing, and when he heard them cry out, “Bat Hakinai,” to one of the girls, he realized she was his daughter. He followed her, and when they reached his house, his wife was sitting there sifting flour. “Her heart saw. Her soul fled.”² The sudden death of Hanania ben Hakinai’s wife instilled fear in Rabbi Hama bar Bisa, and so he made a point of returning home with proper advance warning.

The story presents a sort of “situational tragedy” involving misunderstandings, role reversals, and tragicomic moments. Rabbi Hama, fleeing the sense of mediocrity and dullness he feels in his small village, seeks greatness in the talmudic academy in the big city. But he will find mediocrity and dullness wherever he goes. At the end of the story Rabbi Hama bar Bisa, despite his best intentions, is in a similar position as Rabbi

Hanania bar Hakinai: It seems that for both men the real problem was how long they had stayed away and not how they had returned.

The story of Rabbi Hama bar Bisa also echoes the story of Oedipus, a son who took his father's place and slept with his mother:

I saw the mother of Oedipus[...]"“For Oedipus it could not have been otherwise. In Greek tragedy this aspect of the narrative is known as fate. But in Jewish tragedy the heroes have a choice, and their fate is regarded as a consequence of their choices. In the talmudic story it all could have been otherwise. The storyteller allows us to view the heroes in the critical moments of decision making, recalling the rabbinic saying “All is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted.”⁴

It is possible that like Oedipus, who was pained when he realized what he had done, the son of Rabbi Hama bar Bisa was deeply distressed when he discovered that his father was the rather unimpressive stranger he had encountered in the study house. But the protagonist of the story is not the son but the father, who realized too late the error of his ways. Rabbi Hama traverses several distances over the course of his life: from his father's home to his wife's home; from the small local study house to the large talmudic academy far away. In none of these places does he find peace.

Perhaps this story is giving voice to the dispute between scholars of the[...]”“find a woman and bind himself to her, and only then can he reflect the image of God and live a life of Torah.

Excerpt From: Ruth Calderon. “A Bride for One Night.” Apple Books.

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