



August 2023

Encounters with God: Rabbinic Stories and What We Can Learn from Them

Hershey H. Friedman

Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, x.friedman@att.net

Linda Weiser Friedman

Baruch College of the City University of New York, prof.friedman@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe>

Recommended Citation

Friedman, Hershey H. and Friedman, Linda Weiser (2023) "Encounters with God: Rabbinic Stories and What We Can Learn from Them," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*: Vol. 5, Article 5.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the LAS Proceedings, Projects and Publications at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion and Business Ethics by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most notable stories of our society have been told, retold, re-imagined, interpreted, analyzed, and analyzed once more. Some are for children, some for adults; often, the same story works for both. Some stories are pure fantasy and yet may also be imbued with a moral lesson. Even the most timeless stories often have important historical significance (and vice versa). Teachers often use storytelling to impart or enhance the lesson of the day. It is more than possible that storytelling was even more central to education in antiquity before advances in literacy and printing were widespread. Educators in ancient times used a variety of devices to improve retention, including storytelling.

The sages of the Jewish Talmud were educators and often employed stories¹ in communicating a moral lesson. The stories presented may have relayed actual events or not, much as, for example, fox fables were certainly not taken as literal truth. Many stories centered on various well-known characters such as Satan, the Angel of Death, animals, the prophet Elijah, Biblical figures like Abraham or Moses and, yes, even God. This paper examines the stories in which God plays a central role, interacting with mortals, often with surprising results. What do these stories tell us about the attitude of the ancient sages towards the One they considered to be omniscient and omnipotent?

SOME BACKGROUND

The Jewish Talmud

The Talmud, Judaism's Oral Law, primarily contains rabbinical discussions and commentaries on the Torah's written text. The Talmud, mainly concerned with *halachah* (Jewish law), also provides a detailed record of Jewish people's beliefs, philosophy, traditions, culture, and folklore, *i.e.*, the *aggadah* (homiletics); it is replete with legal, ethical, and moral questions. The Midrash, a separate scripture, records the views of the Talmudic sages and is mainly devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses. The Babylonian Talmud, a product of the academies in Babylon, was completed in 500 CE; the Jerusalem Talmud, a creation of the academies in Israel, was finished in 350 CE.

¹ Hershey H. Friedman, "Mesmerizing Narratives of the Talmud: In Which God Laughs, Satan Sulks, Elijah Rebukes, and Jesters Go To Heaven." *Academia.Edu* (2022). Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/78266376/Mesmerizing_Narratives_of_the_Talmud_In_Which_God_Laughs_Satan_Sulks_Elijah_Rebukes_and_Jesters_go_to_Heaven (accessed August 11, 2023).

There is great interest in the Talmud today, especially in much of Asia.² South Koreans have developed a fascination with the Talmud and have made it part of their curriculum. Many Korean homes have a version of the Talmud and call it the "Light of Knowledge;" they feel that the secret of Jewish success is hidden in the pages of the Talmud.³ The Talmud is also popular in China; there is a belief that it can give one an edge in conducting business.⁴ Socken⁵ and Friedman⁶ provide several reasons why the Talmud is relevant today. The Talmudic scholars used adversarial collaboration as a way to argue productively. They recognized that the only way to arrive at the truth is to study with a partner and to argue in a respectful manner where the goal is to find the truth, not win the argument. The Talmudic style of arguing may have contributed to the ability of Jews to be creative thinkers in areas such as science, law, and business.⁷ The Talmud, rather than dealing solely with laws, used homiletics to enhance the laws.

Z. H. Chajes⁸ states that the aim of the homiletic portion of the Talmud (*aggadah*) was to inspire people to serve the Lord. Eisen⁹ notes that many respected scholars viewed *aggadah* as a parable or "rhetorical invention" for an educational or ethical purpose. Thus, we see that the stories told in the Talmud and Midrash, many cited here, were not necessarily meant to be taken literally. Literal or not, these stories have valuable messages.

This paper relies heavily on translations by Soncino and ArtScroll. The Soncino translation of the Talmud is available for free on the internet and may be found at: <http://www.halakhah.com/>. Translations of the Talmud may also be found at the Sefaria website, <http://www.sefaria.org/>.

² William Kremer. "Why Has a Jewish Law Book Become So Popular?" BBC.com, November 8, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24367959> (accessed August 11, 2023).

³ Aryeh Savir. "Samsung Korea VP Visits Yeshiva To Help Koreans Learn Talmud." Matzav.com, April 24, 2013. Retrieved from <http://matzav.com/samsung-korea-vp-visits-yeshiva-to-help-koreans-learn-talmud> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁴ Isaac Stone Fish. "In China, Pushing the Talmud as a Business Guide." *Newsweek*, December 29, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/china-pushing-talmud-business-guide-69075> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁵ Paul Socken (Ed.), *Why Study Talmud in the Twenty-First Century: The Relevance of the Ancient Jewish Text To Our World*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.)

⁶ Hershey H. Friedman, "The Talmud as a Business Guide," *Multidisciplinary Journal for Applied Ethics*, 1(1), (2012): 38-48. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2134472> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁷ Hershey H. Friedman, "The Art of Constructive Arguing: Lessons From the Talmud," SSRN (2014, July 27). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2472735> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2472735> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁸ Zvi Hirsch Chajes, *The Student's Guide Through the Talmud*. Translated by Jacob Schachter. (New York: Yashar Books, 2005), 195.

⁹ Chaim Eisen, "Maharal's Be'er ha-Golah and his Revolution in Aggadic Scholarship," *Hakirah*, 4, (Winter 2007), 137-193.

The names of the sages usually indicated the father's name; the "b." means *ben* (Hebrew) or *bar* (Aramaic), meaning son. For example, Eliezer b. Shimon is Eliezer the son of Shimon.

The Schools of Hillel and Shammai

There were two schools of Pharisees: The School of Shammai and the School of Hillel. The disagreements between these schools seem to have eventually resulted in a religious war. The Talmud (Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 1:4) states that the Shammaites killed the Hillelites to ensure that they were in the majority when they were going to take a vote to decide who was in control. Some commentaries find it difficult to believe that Shammaites murdered Hillelites and translate the Talmudic statement as meaning that they only threatened to slaughter. However, Lau¹⁰ cites evidence from the Cairo Geniza that there was an actual war between the two schools. The Shammaites successfully prevented many Hillelites from voting, became the majority, and passed 18 stringent measures. These 18 measures passed by the Shammaites erected a ritualistic barrier between Jew and Gentile, making it difficult for the two groups to socialize.¹¹

TALMUDIC STORIES

Storytelling skills are an indispensable way of teaching people lessons. They are even necessary in the business world as a way to connect with stakeholders such as employees, customers, and investors.¹² Unlike case histories that are limited to facts, stories can stir emotions and arouse the audience's passion. This may be why stories, even fiction, have been used to teach ethics.¹³

¹⁰ Binyamin Lau, *The Sages, Volume 2: Character, Context, and Creativity: From Yavneh to the Bar Kochba Revolt*. Translated by Ilana Kurshan. (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011), 223-224.

¹¹ Francis Schmidt, *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 140-141.

¹² Adam Bluestein. "How to Tell Your Company's Story," *Inc.* 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.inc.com/magazine/201402/adam-bluestein/sara-blakely-how-i-got-started.html> (accessed August 11, 2023).

Carmine Gallo, *The Storyteller's Secret*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

¹³ Robert A. Brawer, *Fictions of Business: Insights on Management From Great Literature*. (New York: John Wiley, 1998);

Hershey H. Friedman, James A. Lynch and Paul J. Herskovitz, "Using a Comprehensive Multi-Modal Approach to Teach Values and Ethics." *SS International Journal of Business and*

The sages of the Talmud were not historians; they told stories—fascinating ones. These stories are an ideal way of communicating essential truths ranging from ethics to theology. Rubenstein makes the point that:

The storytellers were not attempting to document "what actually happened" out of a dispassionate interest in the objective historical record, or to transmit biographical facts in order to provide pure data for posterity. This type of detached, impartial writing of a biography is a distinctly modern approach. Nowadays we distinguish biography from fiction...In pre-modern cultures, however, the distinction between biography and fiction was blurred. Ancient authors saw themselves as teachers, and they were more concerned with the didactic point than historical accuracy.¹⁴

Rubenstein¹⁵ stresses that the correct question to ask about a Talmudic story is "What lesson did he [the storyteller] wish to impart to his audience?" and "What does the story teach us about rabbinic beliefs, virtues, and ethics?" Those are more important questions than whether the story is entirely accurate, partially true, or a metaphor.

Halbertal states, "The juxtaposition of law and narrative is a characteristic and important feature of the Talmud." He sees three roles for narrative:

Jewish law and narrative have been joined since the Bible, and one can identify three paradigms for the relationship between them. The first and simplest is when the narrative provides a basis for the law. The story of the exodus from Egypt, for example, explains the meaning of the paschal sacrifice and the various rules of the seder. The second paradigm emphasizes the way in which the story permits a transition to a different sort of legal knowledge. A story allows us to see how the law must be followed; we move from "knowing that" to "knowing how." More than a few Talmudic stories play that role, showing that it

Management Research. 3(2), (2013, March 1), 124-143. Available at SSRN: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2395634 (accessed August 11, 2023); Ellen J. Kennedy and Leigh Lawton, "Business Ethics in Fiction," *Journal of Business Ethics* 11(3), (1992), 187-195;

Peter Singer and Renata Singer, *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics Through Literature*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁴ Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 12.

¹⁵ Rubenstein, 2002, 14.

is sometimes no simple matter to move from text to action. The third paradigm is the most delicate. Here, the story actually has a subversive role, pointing out the law's substantive limitations. That is the paradigm for our series of stories of encounter and forgiveness.¹⁶

Stories in which God Appears

The sections that follow present over two dozen stories from the Talmud and Midrash in which God appears as a character and often communicates directly with people. Many believers will take these stories literally; many will not. As noted above, the purpose of these stories is to teach the reader invaluable lessons about ideas ranging from how a legal system is supposed to work to a better understanding of the Creator.

Most Talmudic scholars reading the stories delve deeply into a single narrative analyzing it much like one might examine a case story. It is worth bearing in mind that this sort of micro approach can lead to confusion regarding how the sages viewed God. For example, in many of the anecdotes, God does not seem to be omniscient, which makes no sense when one studies an individual story on the micro level. By taking a macro approach and categorizing the stories, one has a deeper understanding of what the sages were trying to teach us with these narratives.

What can we learn from these Talmudic stories in which God plays an important role? These stories not only open a window to help us learn about God; they allow us to view these attributes of God through the prism of the minds of the Talmudic sages. We not only learn essential life lessons that the scholars were trying to communicate. It may be even more critical that we can learn from these stories how the Talmudists felt about God. One they considered omniscient, omnipotent, and very holy was still not so important that He couldn't be argued with.

In this paper we will see that God cares about the world that He has created, the creatures – human and animal – in it, and the laws in the Torah. All of these He entrusts to the stewardship of man.

This paper organizes the Talmudic stories about God using four major themes. 1) As a parent and/or teacher – stories which view God in his role as parent,

¹⁶ Moshe Halbertal, M. (2011). "At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud," *Jewish Review of Books* (Fall 2011), para. 8. Retrieved from <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/74/at-the-threshold-of-forgiveness-a-study-of-law-and-narrative-in-the-talmud/>, (accessed August 11, 2023).

teaching important lessons to mortals. 2) As a compassionate role model – stories that illustrate God's compassion with the objective of teaching us to emulate Him. 3) As a foil. Stories in which God allows mortals to argue, challenge, complain, teach, and sometimes even best Him. 4) What is the Law? – stories that examine *halacha* (Jewish law) and the legal process from the point of view of the framer of that law, God.

As one might expect, there is a great deal of overlap, and the stories can easily be categorized differently from the scheme selected here. The following narrative includes many different facets and could probably have been categorized variously into each of the sections that follow in this paper. Let's look at it first.

God Coos Like a Dove

Rabbi Yosi said: I was once traveling on the road, and I entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah of blessed memory appeared and waited for me at the door till I finished my prayer. After I finished my prayer, he said to me: "Peace be with you, my teacher!" I replied: "Peace be with you, my teacher and master!" And he said to me: "My son, why did you go into this ruin?" [and place yourself in danger]. I replied: "To pray." He said, "You should have prayed on the road." I replied: "I feared that passersby might interrupt me." He told me: "You should have said an abbreviated prayer." At that time, I learned from Elijah the following three things: "One must not go into a ruin; one may say the prayer on the road; and if one does say his prayer on the road, he recites an abbreviated prayer."

Elijah further said to me: "My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin?" I replied: "I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove, and saying: 'Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world!'" And he said to me: "By your life and by your head! [ancient form of an oath] Not only at this moment does the divine voice so exclaim, but three times each day does it exclaim thus! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and houses of study and respond: 'May His great name be blessed!' the Holy One, blessed be He, shakes His head and says: 'Happy is the king who is thus praised in this house! What is there for the father who has exiled

his children, and woe to the children who have been exiled from the table of their father!"¹⁷

Many of the stories in this paper may be found in the pages of the *Ein Yaakov*, a collection of the *aggadic* materials in the Talmud. According to Rabbi Yaakov ibn Chaviv, author of the *Ein Yaakov*, this story also has a hidden meaning. It was related after the Bar Kochba rebellion, and the message Elijah gave Rabbi Yosi was not to delve too much into the reasons for the brutal and lengthy exile. Jews should only pray a short prayer regarding the struggles of the exile. This story also hints that God is upset about the destruction of the Temple, which was a punishment and still refers to the Jews as His "children." This is a message of hope that there will be a time when the Jews will go back to a rebuilt Israel. For now, they have to pray in their houses of study and synagogues, which serve as *mikdash me'at* (a small temple). God dwells in the holy places we establish in exile.¹⁸

God coos like a dove in the above story. Typically, though, He is compared to a lion.¹⁹

According to Simon-Shoshan:

This new metaphor even further humanizes God. He appears even more weak and vulnerable, as he yearns for the redemption of His people and His Holy City. Furthermore, the dove is consistently portrayed in aggadic literature as a metaphor for Israel. Thus, God cooing like a dove also suggests that He identifies strongly with His people.

This scene also transforms the nature of the ruin in which R. Yosi prays. In the halakhic section of the story, this ruin appears as an inappropriate place for prayer, due to its marginality, instability, and uncivilized nature. Now, it appears as a place where R. Yosi is privileged to overhear the most intimate goings-on in Heaven. "It is not but the house of God; this is the gate of Heaven." This validates our initial intuition that the story specifies that these ruins are the ruins of Jerusalem because of its significance, and R. Yosi chooses to pray in them, not simply as a way of avoiding the hustle and bustle of the road, but because they are a positive destination. It seems that these ruins are haunted, not by ghosts or demons, but by God Himself. In

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 3a; based on the translations by Soncino and ArtScroll

¹⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 29a

¹⁹ e.g., Isaiah 31:4; Jeremiah 25:38; Hosea 11:10; Hosea 13:7

this view, ruins are not only a place of danger, but a place of spiritual opportunity.²⁰

In the following section we find stories in which God positions Himself as a parent who, as parents do, alternately chastises, instructs, comforts, and loves His children.

AS PARENT AND TEACHER

We sometimes refer to "our Father in Heaven." Thus it should not surprise us that many Talmudic stories see God as a parent figure, occasionally indulgent, sometimes amused, frequently teaching His children essential life lessons.

Don't Mess up My Handiwork

In this story, God is depicted as taking pride in His handiwork, even as He gives it over to man's stewardship – along with a warning to keep it undamaged. Scripture states (Ecclesiastes 7:13): "Look at God's work - for who can straighten what he has twisted?" The following Midrash is the homiletic explanation of this verse.

When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, He took him and led him around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not damage and destroy My world: because if you do, there is no one to repair it after you.²¹

This is reminiscent of a wealthy parent who tries to instill in his offspring respect for the legacy they will inherit. Unfortunately, many such successors do indeed "damage and destroy" what they should have been stewarding carefully and even improving upon.

Who Controls the Weather?

²⁰ Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Lecture 7: Daf 3a (continued) – Whispering Winds." *Torat Har Etzion VBM*, (2016, January 23), paras. 2-3. Retrieved from <https://etzion.org.il/en/talmud/studies-gemara/midrash-and-aggada/daf-3a-continued-whispering-winds>, (accessed August 11, 2023).

²¹ Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13; based on a translation by Sefaria/org.

The following story includes the Talmudic sage Choni, known as HaMagil, the Circle Maker – and we shall soon see where this nickname came from. Choni's relationship with the Creator was very much like that of a son to a father, and so God tolerated Choni's "sass" and even gave it back in His own way.

One time the majority of the month of Adar had passed, and there was still no rainfall. The people sent a message to Choni HaMagil to pray that rain should fall. Choni prayed, but rain did not fall. He drew a circle and stood within it... He declared: "Master of the Universe, Your children are relying on me because they see me as a member of Your household. I take an oath in Your name not to move from here until you show mercy upon Your children."

It rained but in tiny drops. Choni's disciples said to him: "We looked to you to save us from death; however, this rain is only enough to release you from your oath."

Choni then exclaimed to God: "This is not what I asked for! I prayed for enough rain to fill up the cisterns, ditches, and caves." It began to pour. Every drop of rain was as big as the opening of a barrel. The sages estimated that no single raindrop was smaller than one *lug*.

A *lug* is an ancient measurement equal to four *revi'ith*. Many scholars believe that a *revi'ith* is about three fluid ounces; thus, a *lug* is approximately 12 ounces.

Choni's disciples said to him: "We looked to you to save us from death; however, we believe that this rain has come down in order to destroy the earth." Choni then exclaimed to God: "It is not for this kind of rain that I have prayed, but for a rain of kindness, blessing, and bounty." It rained normally.

Whew. That should be it, right? But wait – there's more.

However, the rain continued for so long that the people began fleeing to the Temple Mount because of it. They told Choni:

"Rabbi, just as you prayed for the rain to fall, please pray for it to cease"²²

Finally, after bringing a sacrifice to God, Choni gets God to make the rain stop. Shimon b. Shetach, the leader of the Jewish people at that time, remarked: "Were you not Choni, I would place you under a ban [for being so disrespectful to God] ... But what shall I do to you who misbehaves before God and He fulfills your desire just as a son who misbehaves towards his father and his father fulfills his desire?" Telushkin²³ sees this story as proving that God is a "primordial joker." God teases Choni with a light shower and then a deluge before providing the people with the kind of rain they need.

Arguing Like Parents

In this selection, the disagreement between Moses and God reminds one of parents blaming each other when a child misbehaves. The husband might say to his wife: *Your* daughter...

At first, the Holy One said to Moses (Exodus 3:10): "Now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh and take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." After they made the golden calf, what does it say there? "Go down, because your people whom you have brought out of Egypt have become corrupt" (Exodus 32:7).

Moses exclaimed before the Holy One: Creator of the Universe, when they are sinners, they are mine, and when they are righteous, they are Yours? Whether they are sinners or righteous, they are Yours, because it is written (Deuteronomy 9:29): "They are Your people and Your heritage".²⁴

Laughter in Heaven

²² Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a; based on translations by Soncino and ArtScroll.

²³ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 146.

²⁴ Piska D'Rav Kahana, Pesikta 16.

In the future, the Holy One will take a Torah onto his lap and say: "Anyone who has occupied himself with it should come and take his reward." Immediately, all the nations will gather together and arrive in disorder, as it says (Isaiah 43:9): 'All the nations will gather together.' The Holy One will say to them: "Do not enter in disorder, but allow each nation with its sages to enter separately" ... Immediately, Rome will enter first. The Holy One will say: "With what have you occupied yourself?" They will say: "Creator of the Universe, many marketplaces have we established, many bathhouses have we constructed, and much silver and gold have we accumulated. All this we have done only for Israel so that they should be able to occupy themselves with the study of Torah." The Holy One will say: "Fools of the World, everything that you have done, you have done for yourselves. You established marketplaces in order to place prostitutes there. You constructed bathhouses for your own enjoyment, and the silver and gold is mine" ...

The Romans will depart with a disheartened spirit, and the Persians will enter. The Holy One will say: "With what have you occupied yourself?" They will say: "Creator of the Universe, many bridges have we erected, many cities have we conquered, and many wars have we waged." The Holy One will say: "Everything that you have done, you have done for yourselves. You erected bridges in order to collect tolls. You conquered cities in order to use them for forced labor; as for wars, I wage them, as it is written (Exodus 15:3): 'The Lord is a Master of war.'" ... They too will depart with a disheartened spirit ... The same will happen with every nation.

The nations will then say: "Creator of the Universe, give the Torah to us now, and we will observe it." The Holy One will say to them: "Fools of the World, one who works hard on the eve of the Sabbath will have something to eat on Sabbath, but one who has not worked hard on the eve of Sabbath, from where will he eat on Sabbath? However, I have one easy commandment by the name of *sukkah* [the booth covered with twigs that Jews dine in during the holiday of Tabernacles], go and perform this precept" ... Immediately, each one will go and make himself a small *sukkah* on his roof. The Holy One will make the sun blaze and

penetrate as it does during the summer solstice. Each one of them will kick contemptuously at his *sukkah* and go away ...

The Holy One will sit and laugh at them, as it is written (Psalms 2:4): 'He who sits in Heaven shall laugh'.²⁵

In this story, God has the last laugh on all the nations by proving that He made the right choice in giving His Torah to the Jewish people because they are the only ones who follow the commandments, regardless of their personal comfort.

This story also demonstrates that God does not want capitalism built on greed. If the nations had been able to claim that the goal of their industriousness was to provide for all, their explanation would have been accepted by God. Predatory capitalism is not what God wants for His world; he wants moral capitalism.

Teaching Moses Manners

Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights learning the Torah from God. In the following story from the Talmud, Moses was taught manners – much as a parent might gently criticize a child so that he might learn how to interact with others.

Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said: At the time that Moses ascended to Heaven, he found the Holy One tying crownlets on the letters of the Torah.

The crownlets (*tagim*) are ornamental tags to the Hebrew letters in the Torah.

God said to him: "Moses, do people not give greetings in your town?" Moses replied: "Is it then proper for a servant to extend greetings to his master?" God said to him: "You should have wished me success." Moses then said to Him (Numbers 14: 17): " 'And now let the power of the Lord be great'" ²⁶

If God expects a salutation from a mortal, it is clear how essential greetings are. This story may have been used to teach people how to behave. It is not good for society if people forget about simple courtesies. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the great sage, was known to always be the first to greet everyone. Despite his

²⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah, 2b-3b.

²⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 89a).

prominence, this disciple of Hillel understood the importance of greeting every human being.²⁷

Bar Yochai and the Ideal Life

Zion²⁸ sees the following story as a way of teaching us which road to take: *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) or *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life). There are several arguments about this in the Talmud. Shimon b. Yochai is the proponent of the view "If a man plows at the time of plowing, sows at the time of sowing, harvests at the time of harvesting, threshes at the time of threshing, and winnows at the time of the blowing wind, what will become of the study of Torah?" (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 35b). Rabbi Shimon felt that the ideal life was one in which the people are so righteous that they merit that others do their work, and the entire day is spent studying Torah. Rabbi Yishmael disagrees and asserts that the verse (Deuteronomy 11:14) "And you will gather in your grain" indicates that the ideal life is one in which earning a living is combined with Torah study.

Rabbi Shimon denigrated the Roman government and was to be killed. Here is what happened:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, went and hid in the study hall. Every day, Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water, and they would eat. When the decree intensified, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: Women are easily swayed and, therefore, there is room for concern lest the authorities torture her and she reveals our whereabouts. They then went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred, and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day in that manner. At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that the clothing would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said:

²⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 17a.

²⁸ Noam Zion, "Back to the Cave! Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's Dilemma: Torah or Tikkun Olam?" Academia.edu (2014). Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/8357261/Back_to_the_Cave_Shimon_Bar_Yochais_Dilemma_-_Tikkun_Olam_or_Talmud_Torah (accessed August 11, 2023).

Who will inform bar Yoḥai that the emperor died and his decree has been rescinded?

They emerged from the cave and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai angrily said: These people abandon the eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance. Every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Did you emerge from the cave to destroy My world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said to themselves: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months. Surely our sin was atoned in that time. A Divine Voice rang out and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike [with his fiery gaze], Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world, as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah.

As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: Why do you have these? He said to them: In honor of Shabbat. They said to him: And let one suffice. He answered them: One is corresponding to (Exodus 20:8): "Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy," and one is corresponding to (Deuteronomy 5:12): "Observe the Shabbat day, to keep it holy." Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the commandments are to Israel. Their minds were put at ease, and they were no longer as upset that people were not engaged in Torah study.²⁹

AS A COMPASSIONATE ROLE MODEL

When examining the oeuvre of Talmudic stories, we see that one of the most important Heavenly characteristics for us to emulate is that of compassion. In this section we find a selection of such tales.

²⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 33b-34a; translation based on Sefaria.org and ArtScroll.

No Joy in the Downfall of the Wicked

When the wicked are destroyed, do we rejoice? Does God?

Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And the one came not near the other all the night" (Exodus 14:20)? The ministering angels wanted to sing a song of praise when the Egyptians were drowning in the Sea of Reeds. However, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: The work of My hands, the Egyptians, are drowning in the sea, and you wish to recite songs? This proves that God does not rejoice over the downfall of the wicked.³⁰

God finds no joy in the destruction of His creations, even evildoers (see the translation of Rashi based on the Talmud in Megillah 10b). What God wants is for wrongdoers to repent.

King Solomon's Fate

One might think it takes audacity to argue with God about who deserves to be punished in Hell. This is very different from arguing with God about how Torah law should be applied (see below). In any case, God wins this argument. One lesson from this story is that God, in addition to being very compassionate, is willing to entertain arguments and discussions with mortals.

Rabbi Yehuda stated in the name of Rav that they wished to add one more king—Solomon—to the list of kings that have no share in the World to Come. A vision resembling Solomon's father, King David, appeared before the sages and prostrated itself in supplication, but they ignored it.

A fire from Heaven came and singed their benches, but they ignored it. A Heavenly voice proclaimed to them: "Do you see a

³⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 10b; based on translations by ArtScroll and Sefaria.

man diligent in His work? He will stand before kings, but he shall not stand before the lowly."

Here God is quoting Proverbs 22:29.

King Solomon built My home [the Temple] before his own, and furthermore, he built My home in seven years and his own palace in three years. He should stand before kings and should not stand before the lowly.

They ignored this Heavenly voice. The Heavenly voice then proclaimed: "Shall his compensation be as you wish it? . . . Should you choose and not I?"³¹

God is now quoting from Job 34:33. The reason the Talmudic sages wanted to include Solomon on the list of those who have no portion in the world to come is because of the verse (I Kings 11:4): "For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods and his heart was not whole with the Lord as was the heart of his father, David." The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbos 56b) claims that Solomon did not actually worship idols but did not prevent his numerous wives from worshipping the foreign deities. This is why Scripture considers it as though he himself was guilty of this egregious sin.

Like many Talmudic stories, this one also teaches something about leadership. Leaders should not be autocratic and repressive and make it impossible for anyone to disagree with them.

God is Slow to Anger

One of God's attributes (Exodus 34:6) is "*erech apayim*," translated as long-suffering or slow to anger. In this story, God, the Omniscient One, teaches Moses about compassion. This tale takes place when "Moses ascended on high," i.e., to Heaven in order to receive the Torah.

When Moses ascended on high, he found God sitting and writing "slow to anger" in the Torah. Moses asked God: Are you slow to anger only to the righteous? God replied: Even for the wicked.

³¹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 104b.

Moses said to God: Let the wicked perish...

God responded, saying, you will change your mind in the future about this request. Later, when Israel sinned – after the incident involving the spies – and Moses prayed to God that He spare them...

God said to Moses: Is this not what you told me to be, slow to anger but only for the righteous? Moses replied to God: And did You not tell me that you are slow to anger even to the wicked?

Hence it is written (Numbers 14:17): "And now, I beseech You, may the power of My Lord be magnified as You have said."³²

The true power of God is seen by his forbearance and restraint when dealing with the sinner. God gives the wrongdoer plenty of time to repent by being slow to anger. Similarly, leaders have to be patient with people and slow to anger. Several research studies have found that compassion and kindness on the part of leaders are correlated with productivity and profitability. Furthermore, employees with compassionate leaders are much more likely to be physically and mentally healthy than are those with bad bosses.³³ Seppälä,³⁴ author of *The Happiness Track*, concludes that "compassion is good for the bottom line, it's great for your relationships, and it inspires lasting loyalty. In addition, compassion significantly boosts your health."

Compassion is not just for Humans

The Talmud discusses the tremendous suffering of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (Rebbi). He was afflicted with two diseases, kidney stones and thrush. When Rebbi urinated, he would scream in agony, and the noise would be heard miles away by seafarers – this is probably an exaggeration. The Talmud provides the reason why Rebbi was punished with this much suffering.

³² Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a-111b.

³³ Ray Williams, "Why We Need Empathetic and Compassionate Leaders." LinkedIn.com (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-we-need-empathetic-compassionate-leaders-ray-williams/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

³⁴ Emma Seppälä, "Why Compassion Serves You Better Than Self-Interest." *Knowledge@Wharton* (2016, January 25). Retrieved from <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/compassion-serves-better-self-interest/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

There was once a calf they were leading to slaughter. It ran away and hid its head among the folds of Rebbi's garment and cried. Rebbi told it: "Go! For this, you were created." They declared in Heaven: "Since he does not show pity upon this calf, let us bring suffering upon him." Rabbi was afflicted with a kidney stone and suffered immensely for thirteen years.

The suffering finally stopped as a result of another incident.

One day, Rebbi's maidservant was sweeping the house. Seeing a litter of weasels lying there, she was about to sweep them away. Rabbi said to her: "Leave them be; it is written (Psalms 145:9): "And His compassion is upon all his creations." They then said in Heaven: "Since he is now compassionate, let us show compassion to him"³⁵

This memorable story dramatizes the importance of compassion on the part of leaders and shows that God cares about animal suffering. Animals have to be slaughtered in the most humane way possible. This is why there are strict laws about the knife used for *shechitah* – the Jewish method of slaughtering an animal – it must be extremely sharp without any nicks. Causing needless pain for animals (*tzaar baalei chayim*) violates Torah law. Thus, the Torah states (Exodus 23:5): "If you see the donkey of your enemy straining under its burden, would you refrain from helping him? You shall surely help him."

Why God Chose Moses

Why did God choose Moses to be the leader of the Israelites?

Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's sheep one day, when one of them bolted. Moses followed the runaway animal until it reached a body of water, where it stopped for a drink. Moses compassionately said to the sheep, 'If only I had known that you thirsted for water. You must be exhausted from running ...' Saying this, he scooped up the animal, placed it on his shoulders,

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 85a; Based on ArtScroll translation.

and headed back to his flock. Said God: 'If this is how he cares for the sheep of man, he is definitely fit to shepherd Mine ...'³⁶

This story about Moses when he was Jethro's shepherd teaches us a valuable lesson about leadership.³⁷

AS A FOIL

In literary works, a foil highlights another character's good or bad qualities. In Talmudic tales, God the Omniscient often allows mortals to blame, argue, challenge, and sometimes teach Him. Those who try to best Him are sometimes – but not always – successful. Sometimes He may even be seen to learn from mortals or from His own mistakes. Many of these stories, in addition to teaching us important lessons, also serve to reduce the distance between humanity and the One Above.

Many of these stories, in which God allows Himself to be used as a foil for the purpose of teaching important lessons, are considered humorous. The humor arises from the very notion that God, who is omniscient and omnipotent, may allow mortals to argue with Him, criticize Him, challenge Him, and – even – teach and possibly outsmart Him.

A Blessing from Rabbi Yishmael

In the following story, Yishmael b. Elisha has a fantastic vision. Sometimes God is a teacher and sometimes He even deigns to learn from mortals. The high priest entered the innermost chamber of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).

Rabbi Yishmael b. Elisha said: "I once entered the innermost part of the Temple to offer incense, and I saw that Akatriel, the Lord of Hosts, [i.e., God] was seated on a high and lofty throne." He said to me: "Yishmael, My son, bless me." I said to Him: "May it be Your will that Your compassion should suppress

³⁶ Midrash Shemot Rabbah 2:2; translated by Shlomo Zarchi, "Moses, the Shepherd, Offers Jews a Model of Leadership, Forgiveness," *JWeekly.com* (2013, December 19). Retrieved from <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/70397/torah-moses-the-shepherd-offers-jews-a-model-of-leadership-forgiveness/>.(accessed August 11, 2023).

³⁷ Zarchi, 2013.

Your anger and that Your compassion prevails over all Your other attributes so that You should treat Your children with the attribute of mercy and You should go above and beyond the strict letter of the law for them. And God nodded to me with His head".³⁸

This touching story not only depicts God as asking a mere mortal for a blessing, but this mortal then turns the tables on God because the blessing he gives will benefit the Jewish people. Moreover, God is happy with this blessing. It should also be noted that the expression "*lifnim meshurat hadin*" (literally, inside the line of the law) -- which is usually translated as going "above and beyond the strict letter of the law," was the term used by Yishmael b. Elisha. Since Jewish law demands that we act this way,³⁹ it is appropriate for God Himself to behave this way when dealing with us.

Titus and the Power of God

Historians note that there were three great tragedies during Titus's brief reign as emperor; he was only emperor for two years and two months: (1) Mt. Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 CE; (2) There was a massive fire in Rome that destroyed a significant portion of the city. Cassius Dio said the fire was of "divine origin;" and (3) there was a severe plague that killed many people. All kinds of solutions ranging from sacrifices to medications were tried. According to historians, Titus himself died mysteriously at the age of 42 of a fever (some believe that he was poisoned) on September 13, 81 CE.⁴⁰ Titus's final words were, "I have made only one mistake." It is not clear what he meant by this enigmatic statement. Was he referring to the destruction of the Temple? The Talmud relates this account of how Titus met his demise.

What did Titus do? He took a harlot by the hand and entered the Holy of Holies and spread out a Torah scroll and committed a sin on it. He then took a sword and slashed the *paroches*

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 7a.

³⁹ Hershey H. Friedman, "Let justice pierce the mountain': Morality, Ethics, and Law in the Talmud." SSRN (2015, June 2). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2613759> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2613759> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁴⁰ Donald L. Wasson, "Titus," *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (2013, June 4). Retrieved from [https://www.worldhistory.org/Titus_\(Roman_Emperor\)/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Titus_(Roman_Emperor)/) (accessed August 11, 2023).

The *paroches* is the curtain that separates the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple.

Miraculously blood spurted out, and he thought that he had slain God ... Abba Chanan said: "Who is like You, strong and firm, for You hear the insult and blasphemy of that evil man [Titus] and yet you remain silent?" In the academy of Rabbi Yishmael, it was taught, "Who is like You among the mighty ones, God [*Elim*]? Who is like You among the muted ones [*Illemim*]?"

Both scholars, Abba Chanan and Rabbi Yishmael, interpret these verses homiletically to criticize God for remaining silent while Titus blasphemed. The story continues with Titus continuing to challenge God while God does ultimately respond in an unexpected manner.

What did Titus do next? He took the curtain, shaped it like a basket, brought all the Sanctuary vessels and put them in it, and then put them on board ship to go and triumph with them in his city ... A gale sprang up at sea which threatened to drown him. He said: "Apparently, the power of the God of these people is only over water. When Pharaoh came, He drowned him in water; when Sisera came, He drowned him [his army] in water. He is also trying to drown me in water. If he is truly mighty, let him come up on the dry land and wage war with me." A Heavenly voice emanated saying: "Sinner, son of sinner, descendant of Esau the sinner, I have a tiny creature in my world called a gnat... Go up on the dry land and wage war with it." When he landed, the gnat came and entered his nose, and it picked at his brain for seven years. One day, as he was passing a blacksmith's shop, the gnat heard the noise of the hammer and stopped. Titus said: "I see there is a remedy." So, every day they brought a blacksmith who hammered before him. If he was a non-Jew, they gave him four *zuzim*; if he was a Jew, they said, it is enough that you see the suffering of your enemy. This went on for thirty days, but the creature got used to it.

R. Phineas ben Aruva said: "I was among the nobles of Rome, and when Titus died, they split open his skull and found there a gnat that was like a sparrow weighing two *selas*. A Tanna taught:" The gnat was like a one-year-old dove weighing two *litras*." Abaye said: "We have a tradition that its beak was of

copper and its claws of iron." When Titus was dying, he said: "Burn me and scatter my ashes over the seven seas so that the God of the Jews should not find me and bring me to judgment".⁴¹

This story with the gnat could very well have been used as a way to comfort the Jews.⁴² It is reassuring to know that God punished the person who destroyed the Temple. A similar story is told in a Midrash about Nebuchadnezzar, who demolished the First Temple.⁴³ Preuss⁴⁴ cites sources stating this is a "moral poem to illustrate the teaching that the Lord can destroy even the mightiest ruler with one of His smallest creatures."

Indeed, we know how deadly the small mosquito has been and still can be. Interestingly, there are smaller creatures that can wreak havoc with mortals, i.e., deadly bacteria ranging from flesh-eating ones to MRSA as well as viruses like COVID-19. Preuss⁴⁵ also suggests that this could have been a brain tumor. The "copper beak" might refer to dried blood and the "iron claws" to lime deposits. By the way, people using neti pots to clear their sinuses have been known to die from *Naegleria fowleri*, brain-eating amoeba. This is why there are warnings on neti pots to first boil the water.

Whether one wants to take this story literally or as a moral message, people need humility. It does not take much to kill a human being.

Who Can Annul the Oath of God?

The stories of Rabba bar bar Chanah (grandson of Chanah) are generally not taken literally. Soncino feels that they are "allegories on the political and social conditions" that prevailed then. The Talmud relates 21 of his stories.⁴⁶ Here is one of them:

The Arab merchant said to me: "Come, I will show you Mount Sinai." I went and saw that scorpions surrounded it, and they stood like white donkeys. I heard a Heavenly voice saying: "Woe is to Me that I have made an oath to exile My people; now

⁴¹ Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b.

⁴² Judah David Eisenstein (Editor), *Ozar Yisrael: An Encyclopedia of All Matters Concerning Jews and Judaism*. (Jerusalem: Shiloh, 1935).

⁴³ Eisenstein, 1935.

⁴⁴ Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*. Translated by Fred Rosner. (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 205.

⁴⁵ Preuss, 1978, 205-206.

⁴⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 73a-74b.

that I have made the oath, who can annul it for Me?" When I came back before the Rabbis, they said to me: "Every Abba [that was Rabbah's name; Rabbah is a contraction of Rabbi Abbah] is as stupid as a donkey; and every bar bar Chanah is a fool. You should have declared: "It is annulled for You."⁴⁷

A scholar has the authority to annul vows. Some Talmudic insults are simply classic.

Moses Annuls God's Oath

A scholar or court may absolve one's oath under certain situations. This is usually done by ascertaining that the individual making the oath did not have perfect knowledge and made the vow without considering every ramification.

When the Israelites made the golden calf, Moses tried to convince God to forgive them. God said: Moses, I have already sworn that (Exodus 22:19), "One that sacrifices unto the deities other than God alone shall be utterly destroyed," and I cannot take back an oath which emanates from My mouth. Moses replied: "Creator of the Universe, did you not grant me the power of annulling oaths?" Any elder that passes judgment, who desires that his pronouncement should be accepted, should be the first to accept the pronouncement. You, who commanded me regarding annulling oaths, it is only fitting that I should be able to rescind your vow the way you commanded me to nullify the oaths of others." Immediately, Moses wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and sat as an elder of the court, and God stood as one inquiring about his oath.⁴⁸

How do you rescind the vow of God, who is omniscient? For that matter, how do you tell God—in effect—to practice what He preaches? God showed great humility by allowing a mere mortal to annul His oath. And Moses must have had great courage to, in effect, tell God to practice what He preaches.

Moses Teaches God

⁴⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 74a; based on the translations of ArtScroll and Soncino.

⁴⁸ Midrash Exodus Rabbah 43:4 and Babylonian Talmud Berachos 32a.

Several stories involving Moses and God depict Moses as the teacher and God as the student who learns His lessons. The Talmud describes a situation in which God implicitly admits that He made a "mistake" in explaining the meaning behind God's reply to Moses regarding His name (Exodus 3:14), "I Will Be What I Will Be."

God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites that I shall be with them in this servitude just as I will be with them in other servitudes. Moses told God: "They have enough troubles now; You do not have to tell them about future troubles." God agreed with Moses and instructed Moses to tell the Israelites (Exodus 3:14): "I Will Be has sent me".⁴⁹

God may be omniscient, but he is willing to learn and even admits to making mistakes. This is surprising and, of course, humorous, given that He is all-knowing. If omniscient God is willing to learn, how much more so should mortals also be open to new ideas.

This Midrash relates that Moses "taught" God three things, and God is not shy about learning new things; He even admitted to Moses: "You have taught Me something." The first time was after the sin of the golden calf.

'Then sang Israel' (Numbers 21:17). This is one of the three things said by Moses to God to which God replied: You have taught Me something. Moses said to God: Creator of the Universe! How can Israel realize what they have done? Were they not raised in Egypt, and all Egyptians are idolaters?

Also, when You gave the Torah, You did not give it to them. And they were not even standing nearby; as Scripture (Exodus 20:18) states: 'And the people stood at a distance.'

And You only gave the Torah to me; as Scripture states (Exodus 24:1): 'Then He said to Moses: Come up to the Lord.' When You gave the commandments, You did not say 'I am the Lord your [plural] God, 'but said (Exodus 20:2): 'I am the Lord your [singular] God.'" Did I sin? God said to Moses: By your life, you have spoken well and have taught Me. From now on, I will use the expression 'I am the Lord your [plural] God.'

⁴⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 9b.

The verse in Exodus is the first of the ten commandments and is in singular form. This does not translate well into English since we use the word "Your" for both singular and plural.

The second occasion was when God said to Moses (Exodus 20:5): 'punishing the children for the parents' sin to the third and fourth generation.' Moses said to God: Creator of the Universe, Many wicked people begot righteous children. Shall the children be punished for the sins of their fathers? Terach worshipped idols, yet Abraham, his son, was righteous. Similarly, Hezekiah was a virtuous person, though Ahaz, his father, was wicked. So also, Josiah was upright, yet Amon, his father, was evil. Is it proper that the righteous should be punished for the sins of their fathers? God said to Moses: You have taught Me something. By your life, I shall nullify My words and uphold yours; as it is written (Deuteronomy 24:16): 'Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.' And by your life, I shall record these words in your name; as it says (II Kings 14:6): 'in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the Lord commanded: 'Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents...'

The third occasion was when God said to Moses: Make war with Sichon. Even if he does not seek to interfere with you, you must start a war against him, as it says (Deuteronomy 2:24): 'Set out now and cross the Arnon Gorge. See, I have given into your hand Sichon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle.' Moses, however, did not do so but, in accordance with what is written lower down, sent messengers [of peace]. God said to Moses: By your life, I shall nullify My own words and uphold yours; as it says (Deuteronomy 20:10): 'When you approach a city to wage war against it, make its people an offer of peace.' Seeing that Sichon did not accept their peace overtures, God cast him down before them; as it says (Deuteronomy 2:33): 'the Lord our God delivered him over to us, and we struck him down'.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Midrash Rabbah Numbers 19:33; based on Soncino translation.

The message of these stories is that people, too, must be willing to admit they are mistaken and thus arrive at the truth, especially when it comes to law. If God can admit to being wrong, then mortals can certainly do so.

God Admits to an Unjust World

In the following narrative, we see God admitting that the world is sometimes unjust and that he would have to remake it to change the sad plight of some unfortunates. He tells Rabbi Elazar b. Pedat that He will make it up to him in the next world and describes the reward, but Rabbi Elazar is not that thrilled with his future reward.

Rabbi Elazar b. Pedat was in dire poverty. Once, after bloodletting, he had nothing to eat, so he took some garlic peel and placed it into his mouth. He grew faint and fell asleep. The rabbis came to ask him something and noticed that he was crying and laughing and that a spark of fire emerged from his forehead. When he awoke, they asked him: Why did you cry and laugh?

He said to them: Because I saw God sitting with me, I asked Him, How long will I continue to suffer in this world? He said to me: Elazar, my son, would it please you if I turned the world back to its very beginnings? Perhaps then you might be born at a more auspicious time for achieving sustenance. I said: All this and only "perhaps"? I then asked: Which is longer, the time I have already lived, or the time I am still to live? God said: The time you have already lived is longer.

That was why he cried.

I then said to God: If so, then I do not require that you remake the world.

God then said to me: As a reward for saying that you do not require it, I will provide for you in the next world thirteen rivers of pure balsam oil, which you will be able to enjoy.

So that is why he laughed.

I said to Him: Only that and nothing more? He said to me: Then what will be left for Me to give to your colleagues? I said to God: Am I asking from someone who has nothing? He then flicked

me on my forehead with his finger and said: Elazar, My son, I shot My arrow at you.

Thus, the sparks. According to Rashi, a foremost commentator on the Torah and Talmud, this last statement expresses love. God was telling Elazar that He loved him. Seemingly, God enjoyed Elazar's retort that being omnipotent, He could "afford" to give Elazar a much greater reward.⁵¹

It is incredible in this and other stories how easy it is to complain to the Almighty, a powerful lesson for leaders.

Rabbah Teaches God

This Talmudic story also shows God "learning" from a mortal. Indeed, God is portrayed as One who studies the law (also seen in the next section) and quotes mortals. Elijah the Prophet is considered to have ascended to Heaven without actually dying in the mortal world. He is considered to reveal himself to great people. In this case, Elijah serves as a sort of conduit between mortals and God.

Rabbah b. Shila once encountered Elijah the Prophet. He asked him: What is the Holy One doing? Elijah answered: He is quoting legal decisions in the names of all the Rabbis, but not in the name of Rabbi Meir. Rabbah asked: Why? Elijah answered: Because Rabbi Meir studied laws from the mouth of *Acher*.

Acher, literally, *the other*, is a name given to Rabbi Elisha b. Avuyah, who became a heretic.

Rabbah explained: Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate; he ate the fruit on the inside and discarded the peel. Elijah answered: Now God is saying, 'Meir, my son, says ...'⁵²

Who ought to know best what is in the heart of man, God or Rabbah? Yet, when Rabbah explains that Rabbi Meir only culled the good in learning from *Acher* the heretic, and discarded the bad, God accepts this and starts quoting Rabbi Meir along with everyone else. This, even though God is the One Who gave the law to the Israelites. An important lesson derived from this story is the importance of

⁵¹ Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 25a.

⁵² Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15b.

learning from everyone. If God is willing to learn from a mortal, mortals should not be arrogant when acquiring knowledge. This idea is also expressed in Avos:

There are four types among those who sit before the sages: A sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. A sponge absorbs everything; a funnel receives at one end and lets out at the other; a strainer lets out the wine and retains the dregs; a sieve lets out the coarse meal and retains the fine flour.⁵³

A person should be like a sieve when learning and knowing what to retain and what to discard.

Blaming God for the Golden Calf

Not only may one argue and "teach" God, but apparently He may also be blamed for the sins of His people, in this case, the sin of the golden calf.

The verse states (Exodus 32:11): "Moses began to plead before God his Lord, and said, Lord, why unleash your wrath against Your people, that You brought out of Egypt . . ." Why did Moses decide to mention here the exodus from Egypt? Moses said: Creator of the Universe, from where did You bring them out? From Egypt, where everyone worships lambs.

Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: This can be compared to a wise person who opened a perfume store for his son in a street of prostitutes. The street did its part, the business did its part, and the young man did his part and fell into bad ways. His father came and caught him with prostitutes. He started yelling, saying: I will kill you! A friend said to the father: You caused the boy's ruination, yet you are screaming at him. You ignored all other occupations and taught him perfumery; you ignored all other streets and could only open the store in the street of prostitutes. So too did Moses say: Creator of the Universe, You forsook the whole world and caused your children to be enslaved only in Egypt, where lambs are

⁵³ Avos 5:15.

worshipped. That is from whom your children learned and made the golden calf.

This is the reason Moses said: ". . . that you brought out of Egypt".⁵⁴

Consulting with His Angels

In this story, Moses is critical of God, believing that God may possibly be providing an opening for a belief in more than one god. The verse states (Genesis 1:26), "And God said: Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." This is written in the plural ("us"). The problem is, who was God talking to when He decided to create man? The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 8:8) states that Moses when writing the Torah, told God that this verse would give an excuse to heretics to believe in more than one God.

Rabbi Shmuel b. Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse: "And God said: let us make man," he said, Sovereign of the Universe! Why do you give an excuse to heretics? Write, replied God. Whoever wishes to err may err. Moses, said the Lord to him, this man that I have created — do I not cause men both great and small to spring from him? Now, if a great man comes to obtain permission [for a proposed action] from one less than he, he may say, Why should I ask permission from my inferior! Then they will answer him, learn from your Creator, who created all that is above and below. Yet when He came to make man, He took counsel from the ministering angels.⁵⁵

God feels His job is to teach humanity important lessons. These lessons are often about leadership, as in this case. The lesson is obvious; leaders should not make decisions unilaterally and consult with a cabinet.

⁵⁴ Midrash Exodus Rabbah 43:7.

⁵⁵ Midrash Genesis Rabbah 8:8; translation based on Soncino.

To Save the Israelites

Moses is not afraid to argue with God (who seems to enjoy debating Moses) and find legal loopholes to help save his people. Moses is the ideal servant leader who loves his people and fights to protect them.

Moses said to God: Why are you angry with the Israelites? Is it not because they made an idol? You never told them not to do this. God replied to Moses: Did I not say in the second commandment (Exodus 20:3), "Thou shalt have no other gods before me?" Moses answered: You did not command them, you commanded me. You did not say, "You (plural) shalt not have." It was thus only me that You commanded. Hence, if I have made an idol (Exodus 32:32), "Blot me, please, out of Your book".⁵⁶

Moses said to God: This (golden) calf that the Israelites made can now assist You. It will send down the rain, and You will produce the dew. The Holy One said to him: Is there any substance to it? Moses then retorted: If there is no substance to it, then why are you angry with the Israelites?⁵⁷

God's Bet with King David

In this story, King David challenges God and thinks he will be able to easily outsmart Him.

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: A person should never bring himself to be tested: David, King of Israel, asked to be tried and failed. David asked God: Creator of the Universe, why do we say in the (Amidah) prayer, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and do not say the God of David? God replied: They were tested, and you were not. David said: Examine and test me, as it is written (Psalms 26:2), "Examine me, God, and test me." He answered: I will test you and do something special for you. They were not informed

⁵⁶ Midrash Exodus Rabbah 47:9.

⁵⁷ Midrash Numbers Rabbah 2:15.

beforehand about the nature of the test, but I will tell you in advance that the test will involve sexual immorality.⁵⁸

Evidently, David thought he would free himself from sexual desire by having intercourse with his wives during the daytime, when he might be tempted by other women, but as the Talmud points out, controlling one's sexual urges does not work that way: "There is a small organ in a person. When it is hungry, it is satisfied; when it is satisfied, it is hungry." David failed the test and cohabited with Bathsheba, a married woman. With that, he lost his wager with God, but not gracefully. The narrative continues:

David said to God: You know very well that had I wished to overcome my desire, I could have done so, but I did not want people to say the slave defeated his Master.⁵⁹

David knew that if he had not sinned with Bathsheba, he would have been right in his assertion that he deserved to be included in the prayer mentioned above. And that is why he so magnanimously "let" God win the bet. This is another Talmudic narrative that humanizes God and demonstrates how fair he is. He even allows David to get away with his ridiculous assertion that he purposely lost the bet.

God is a Matchmaker

This classic story is from the Midrash, and it answers the question as to what God does all day. In the next section, we will see that He also spends some time debating laws with the Heavenly Academy. Here, though, we learn that matchmaking may be more complicated than legal debates.

The following dialogue is reported in the name of R. Yosi ben Chalafta, one of the Mishnah's most prominent sages, and an unnamed Roman woman of rank.

She asked R. Yosi, "In how many days did God create the world?"

"In six," he answered.

"And since then," she asked, "what has God been doing?"

"Matching couples for marriage," responded R. Yosi.

⁵⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 107a.

⁵⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 107a.

"That's it!" she said dismissively. "Even I can do that. I have many slaves, both male and female. In no time at all, I can match them for marriage."

To which R. Yosi countered, "Though this may be an easy thing for you to do, for God it is as difficult as splitting the Sea of Reeds." After which, she left.

The next day the aristocrat lined up a thousand male and a thousand female slaves and paired them off before nightfall. The morning after, her estate resembled a battlefield. One slave had his head bashed in, another had lost an eye, while a third hobbled because of a broken leg. No one seemed to want their assigned mate. Quickly, she summoned R. Yosi and acknowledged. "Your God is unique, and your Torah is true, pleasing and praiseworthy. You spoke wisely".⁶⁰

This is another example of an individual who tried to best God. Sometimes it works; sometimes, not. This beautiful story demonstrates that God cares about humanity and is busy making matches. It also reveals the importance of marriage to God.

WHAT IS THE LAW?

One would expect that Talmudic stories in which God figures prominently would be there to help us understand God's law. That might be true, but it does not always happen the way we expect.

⁶⁰ Midrash Bereshit Rabba, 68:4; translation from Sefaria.org.

The Oven of Akhnai

The Oven of Akhnai is one of the great stories of the Talmud. It is one of six stories examined by Rubenstein in his book. Rubenstein⁶¹ states: "Philosophers, psychologists, and legal theorists have explicated the story in terms of their disciplines—a rare example of a Talmudic passage entering the general discourse of Western culture." To fully understand this story, one needs to know some of the backgrounds. Rabbi Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, who was of the Shammai school, refused to go along with the majority in a dispute regarding an oven of Akhnai as to whether it could become ritually unclean.

To prove his point about the oven of Akhnai, Rabbi Eliezer performed various miracles. He did not want to yield to the Hillelites and conform to majority rule.

On that day, R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the Sages did not accept them. He said to them: If the *halachah* is in accord with me, let this carob tree prove it! Immediately, the carob tree was uprooted and moved one hundred cubits from its place -- some say 400 cubits. The Sages responded: No proof can be brought from a carob tree.

He further said to them: If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it! Thereupon, the stream of water flowed backward. The sages responded: No proof can be brought from a stream of water.

Again he said to them: If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it! After that, the walls started leaning as if to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua reprimanded the walls: When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, why are you interfering? Out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, they did not fall, and out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, they did not straighten out; they are still standing tilted.

Rabbi Eliezer further said: If the *halachah* is as I say, let it be proven from Heaven. A Heavenly voice then rang out and exclaimed: What do you want with Rabbi Eliezer, since the law is in agreement with him in all areas. Rabbi Yehoshua then got up on his feet and declared: 'The Torah is not in Heaven'

⁶¹ Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 34.

(Deuteronomy 30:12). What does 'not in Heaven' mean? Rabbi Yirmiyah said: Since the Torah was already given at Sinai, we pay no attention to Heavenly voices. After all, it is written in the Torah itself: 'After the majority, one must follow' (Exodus 23:2). Rabbi Nathan met Elijah the Prophet and asked him: What was God doing at that time [when His Heavenly voice was disregarded]? Elijah answered: He laughed and said: My children have triumphed over me. My children have triumphed over me.⁶²

This story makes it quite clear that you cannot win a legal debate by using miracles or even having God agree with your position. One key message of the above story is the importance of following process. Jewish law, as do many legal systems, works with majority rule. This story suggests that even if one individual is wiser than the majority and has the support of God Himself, we still must follow majority rule. Suppose the Sanhedrin would have yielded to Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, this would establish a new principle that the opinion of a mastermind trumps the majority. This kind of system might work occasionally, but it is easy to see how it could fall apart and lead to anarchy or a total breakdown of a legal system. Who decides on who is the most extraordinary legal mind of that generation? We follow the majority, not because it is always right but because that is the ideal way to have a functioning system. One other interesting point this story makes is about God. He has a sense of humor and can laugh. This is a healthy way to understand religion and brings God close to humanity.

This story also suggests that one should not be a textualist/originalist when it comes to law. Burling explains the difference between textualism, originalism, and living constitutionalism.

Originalism's revival in the 1980s was a reaction to the theory of the "Living Constitution." That theory called for judges to interpret the Constitution, not according to its language, but rather according to evolving societal standards. In other words, judges shouldn't focus on what the Constitution says, but what it ought to say if it were written today.⁶³

⁶² Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b.

⁶³ James Burling, "What is the Difference Between Originalism vs. Textualism vs. Living Constitutionalism?" *Pacific Legal Foundation* (2022, April 7), para. 4. Retrieved from <https://pacificlegal.org/originalism-vs-textualism-vs-living-constitutionalism/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

The term originalist may be interpreted in two ways; the difference is relatively small.

There were two slightly different understandings of originalism.

One is "original intent" that says we should interpret the Constitution based on what its drafters originally intended when they wrote it. The other is that we should interpret the Constitution based on the original meaning of the text—not necessarily what the Founders intended, but how the words they used would have generally been understood at the time.

Both versions of originalism—original intent and original meaning—contend that the Constitution has permanent, static meaning that's baked into the text. Originalism, in either iteration, is in direct contravention of the "Living Constitution" theory.⁶⁴

In the U.S., we have this problem with interpreting the Constitution because of these several approaches.

With regard to constitutional interpretation, the judge must decide, among other things, how much weight to give arguments about the plain meaning of the Constitution's text, the text's purpose or spirit, and historical evidence concerning the intent of the framers and ratifiers of the Constitution.⁶⁵

The late Justice Antonin Scalia believed the correct way to interpret the Constitution was according to the "public meaning." He railed against using an approach that saw the Constitution as a "living," morphing, and evolving document. To him, the only good Constitution was a dead one.⁶⁶

God surely knows what His original intention was when He gave the Torah. However, the aims of the One who wrote the text are not as relevant as those whose

⁶⁴ Burling, 2022, paras 6-8.

⁶⁵ R. Randall Kelso, "Styles of Constitutional Interpretation and the Four Main Approaches to Constitutional Interpretation in American Legal History," *Valparaiso University Law Review*, 29 (1,2), (1994), 121-233. Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol29/iss1/2>, p. 123 (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁶⁶ Bruce A Murphy, "Scalia and the 'Dead' Constitution," *New York Times*, February 15, 2016, A19.

job is to interpret the law. The following story sheds additional light on how the Sages felt about taking a textualist/originalist approach to law.

Rabbah Resolves a Heavenly Dispute

The Talmud describes how Rabbah b. Nachmeni died. The government did not like that Rabbah's lectures resulted in thousands of Jewish people not being in their homes during the two months preceding Rosh Hashanah and Passover holidays, thereby making it difficult for the tax collectors to collect the monthly tax. The government sent agents to capture him. He had difficulty eluding the King's men and was finally caught. He managed to escape and was hiding in a swamp, totally exhausted, sitting on the stump of a tree and studying Torah. Meanwhile:

There was a dispute in the Heavenly Academy regarding laws of leprosy: If the bright spot on the skin precedes the white hair, the person is impure;

That is, the individual has leprosy, which renders one into the "impure" state.

... if the white hair precedes the bright spot, the person is ritually pure.

What if there is a doubt as to which one came first?

God said 'pure' and the entire Heavenly Academy said 'impure.'

They decided to ask Rabbah b. Nachmeni to resolve this dispute, since he once said, 'I am unique in my knowledge of leprosy and tents.'

Both tractates deal with ritual impurity and are quite complex. However, bringing Rabbah to Heaven to resolve this dispute proved difficult as he continued to engage in Torah study and one cannot die while studying Torah.

They sent a messenger to get him, but the Angel of Death could not approach him since Rabbah did not cease his Torah studies. Meanwhile, a wind began to blow, which made the reeds rustle. Rabbah thought it was a company of soldiers coming to get him. He said: "It is better that I die than be delivered into the hands of the government." While dying, he exclaimed, [in response to the Heavenly question]: "Pure! Pure!" A Heavenly voice

declared: "Happy are you Rabbah b. Nachmeni, your body is pure and your soul departed in purity".⁶⁷

Did Rabbah know more than God? This story illustrates that when it comes to a legal dispute, even one between God and the Heavenly Academy, a well-trained expert must be brought in to resolve the dispute. Interestingly, Maimonides, who wrote the encyclopedic compilation of Talmudic law, concluded that when there is uncertainty as to which came first, the white hair or the bright spot, the law is that the person is impure.⁶⁸ Thus, Maimonides disagreed with God.

An important idea conveyed by this story is that no matter how brilliant the individual, it is essential to consult with others. God argues with the Heavenly Academy in the above narrative instead of explaining His own law. This alone is difficult to comprehend, but that God and the Heavenly Academy decide to consult with a mortal is even stranger. The lesson is clear: constructive arguing about issues and consulting with others is the only way to arrive at the truth. The most outstanding leaders should emulate God and consult with others before making decisions.

A second lesson is that one should not be a strict fundamentalist regarding the law. As noted above, the Shammai School "lives in a world of tradition and decrees, a world in which there is no room for intellectual argumentation and debate".⁶⁹

This story supports the view that God, the framer of His constitution – the Torah – understood that man was allowed and even supposed to interpret it using the perspective of a person living hundreds of years later. Rabbah lived about 1,600 years after the Torah was given. This story has a similar message to the Oven of Akhnai in that the "Torah is not in Heaven," and humans have the job of interpreting it considering the intent of the framer but also examining the effects and consequences on human beings. The Hillelites believed that legal consequences such as the effect of the law on human dignity, peace, and/or making the world a better place had to be considered when interpreting the law. This is why God must go to mortals to see how the law has been applied, not the other way around.

An additional message from the above story is that one must show respect for the opinion of others. That is the secret of Talmudic debate: respecting the opinion of others. If God can have a constructive argument and even consult with

⁶⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 86a.

⁶⁸ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Leprosy 2:9.

⁶⁹ Binyamin Lau, *The Sages Volume 1 Second Temple Period*, Translated by Michael Prawer, (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), 223.

a mortal, all the more so should people have respect for the other party when disagreeing.

Debating Like Hillel

The following tale is a case where God does weigh in and his opinion wins. The Babylonian Talmud (Eruvin 13b) explains why the law is according to the School of Hillel and not the School of Shammai.

For three years, the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated each other. These said the *halacha* agrees with our view, and these said the *halacha* is in accord with our view. Then, a heavenly voice went forth and announced: both opinions are the words of the living God, but the *halacha* is in agreement with the School of Hillel...

What did the School of Hillel do to merit that the *halacha* is according to their view? Because they were kindly and modest, and they studied their own opinion and those of the School of Shammai. And not only that, but they would mention the opinion of the School of Shammai before their own.⁷⁰

It was not only Hillel who was modest; his disciples also had great character and humility. The Talmud concludes that the School of Hillel had humility, and whoever searches for greatness, it flees from him. One who humbles himself, the Lord lifts up. The way to debate is to respect the opinions of one's opponent, and one learns by listening to the other side's view and respecting it. That is the secret of Talmudic debate: respecting the opinion of others.

As far as listening to the *bath kol* (Heavenly voice) to decide on laws, Tosafos⁷¹ notes that the reason the Sages did not accept the decision of Heaven when it came to the oven of Akhnai is because the Torah makes it clear that the law follows the majority. Moreover, the *bath kol* emerged to protect the honor of Rabbi Eliezer; when it comes to the law, however, the majority rules.

Moses Asks Why Good People Suffer

⁷⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b.

⁷¹ see Bava Metzia 59b, s.v. *Lo Bashomaim Hi*.

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: " When Moses ascended to the heavens, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in attaching crownlets to the letters of the Torah. Moses said to God: "Lord of the Universe! Who is staying Your hand?"

In other words, why are these additions necessary?

God said to him: "There is one man who will arise after many generations, Akiva the son of Yosef is his name, who will in the future expound on every tip of each letter, mounds and mounds of laws."

Moses said to God: "Lord of the Universe! Show him to me."

God said to him: " Turn around." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows of students in Rabbi Akiva's academy, and he did not know what they were talking about. Moses got upset. As soon as Rabbi Akiva came to a certain subject, his students said to him: "Our teacher, from where do you know this?" Rabbi Akiva said to them: "It is a law that was taught to Moses at Sinai." Moses was comforted.

Thereupon, Moses returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said: "Lord of the Universe! You have a man like this, and You are giving the Torah through me?"

God said to Moses: " Be silent, for such is My decree." Moses said to God: "Lord of the Universe! You have shown me his Torah; show me his reward."

God said to him: "Turn around." Moses turned around and saw that they were weighing out his flesh at the market stalls.

The Romans killed Rabbi Akiva during the Hadrianic persecutions by tearing his flesh with iron combs.

Moses said to God: "Lord of the Universe! Such Torah, and such a reward!" God said to him: "Be silent, for such is My decree."⁷²

⁷² Babylonian Talmud, Menachos 29b; based on translations by Sefaria and Soncino

There are many lessons in the above story. One crucial lesson deals with the workings of a legal system. Moses understood the basic principles of the law and the rules needed to know how to interpret it. The actual law in the time of Rabbi Akiva was impossible for Moses to comprehend. This story is another one that supports the idea of not taking a text-based Originalist approach.

This story also is reminiscent of the Book of Job. Moses asks God to explain the reason for human suffering, particularly why Rabbi Akiva died such a horrific death. This is a question humankind always asks: "Why do good people suffer?" God did not provide Job with the answer other than making it clear that mortals were not capable of understanding it: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (Job 38:4) ... Have you ever in your life commanded the morning or told the dawn its place?" (Job 38:12). Moses also was told to be silent and not ask the question.

What is the Law (Exactly)?

According to the Talmud, if the Torah had been handed down cut and dried so that there would be no possibility for differences in opinion about the law, the world wouldn't have a leg to stand on.⁷³ In other words, we could not survive such a legal system.

Moses said to God: "Lord of the universe! Teach me the precise law. God said to Moses (Exodus 23:2): "... 'follow the majority to decide the law.' If the majority acquit, acquit; if the majority say guilty, then guilty."

The Torah may be interpreted in forty-nine ways leading to a decision of impure and in forty-nine ways leading to a decision of pure. And forty-nine is the numerical equivalent of the word *v'diglo* (Song of Songs 2:4).⁷⁴

In Hebrew, the letters of the alphabet have numerical equivalents. Thus, aleph = 1, bet = 2, gimmel = 3, etc. The numerical equivalent (*gematria*) of the word *v'diglo* is 49. This is a mnemonic device to remember that there are forty-nine ways to decide the law.

⁷³ Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:2.

⁷⁴ Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:2.

The sages of the Talmud understood the importance of a flexible legal system, one based on logical arguments. They recognized the dangers of a legal system where everything was defined exactly with no room for legal discussions.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the characteristics, lessons, and ideas contained in each of the stories we examined. Naturally, there are other ways of doing this – in fact, we already have a section-by-section categorization of the way the tales have been presented. Additionally, other items of possible interest have not been itemized; for example, who or what are the other characters in the stories? Who interacts with God? We could find stories here that include Elijah the prophet, Moses, Heavenly voices and angels, various Talmudic sages, and heretics; the wicked and the good.

Looking at Table 1, it is clear that we could create a category of humorous stories. In fact, almost every tale in which the omniscient God deigns to allow mortals to argue with him can – arguably – be considered amusing. It might be interesting to collect a subset of these in which God is bested by mortals and vice versa. We could call that one "Who's in Charge Here?"

Table 1 The Stories and their Characteristics

Story:	God tolerates mortals who:													
	Parent	Teacher	Leadership	Compassion	Humor	Appreciating the world	Halacha / Jewish Law	Argue with Him	Blame Him	Criticize Him	Teach Him	Challenge Him	Outsmart Him	Did not Outsmart Him
God Coos Like a Dove	x	x		x			x							
Don't Mess up My Handiwork	x	x				x								
Who Controls the Weather?	x				x			x						
Arguing Like Parents	x				x									
Laughter in Heaven	x	x			x		x							
Teaching Moses	x	x												
Manners														
Bar Yochai and the Ideal Life		x		x		x								
No Joy in Downfall of Wicked				x										
King			x	x				x				x		
Solomon's Fate		x	x	x				x						
God is Slow to Anger		x	x	x										
Compassion not just for Humans		x	x	x										
Why God Chose Moses		x	x	x										
A Blessing from Rabbi Yishmael	x	x		x	x						x		x	
Titus and the Power of God		x				x		x				x		x
Who Can Annul the Oath of God?	x						x							

<i>Moses Annuls God's Oath</i>			X		X	X		X	X
<i>Moses Teaches God</i>	X	X	X					X	X
<i>God Admits to an Unjust World</i>	X					X		X	X
<i>Rabbah Teaches God</i>						X		X	
<i>Blaming God for the Golden Calf</i>			X		X	X	X	X	X
<i>Consulting with His Angels</i>	X	X				X		X	
<i>To Save the Israelites</i>		X	X			X		X	X
<i>God's Bet with King David</i>			X			X		X	X
<i>God is a Matchmaker</i>		X	X			X			X
<i>The Oven of Akhnai</i>		X			X	X			
<i>Heavenly Dispute? Ask Rabbah</i>		X			X	X			
<i>Debating Like Hillel</i>	X	X			X				
<i>Why Do Good People Suffer</i>		X			X				
<i>What is the Law?</i>	X				X				

CONCLUSION

The Rabbinic stories involving God are a clever device to teach various lessons about the Divine. Several of the above narratives demonstrate conclusively how the legal system based on the Torah is supposed to work. The legislators are not supposed to be originalists but must use their own judgments to interpret the law. The stories were also designed to show that God cares about people and even spends His time as a matchmaker. God is very close to humanity in Talmudic stories and even laughs when they "best" Him; he is also a bit of a joker. He has incredible warmth for His creations and sometimes seeks advice and blessings

from mortals. He appreciates a good discussion and allows angels and people to argue with him.

An important lesson for leaders is to have humility and not be afraid of consulting with others before making decisions. After all, if God consults with others (angels and even mortals), humans should undoubtedly imitate God and not be hasty to judge.