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Torat Levi Yitzchak

From the writings of

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson

of blessed memory

Adapted by Rabbi Eli Block

Through the Garden, Over the River
The events surrounding the deaths of two Sages reveal their intellectual and spiritual compositions.

Death is a summation. The thick ink of life is teased onto paper in short strokes—episodes, thoughts, opinions, people, places—and when the pen holds no more, there remains a lifetime. The moment of death, Chassidut teaches, is a précis of all that has preceded it. With the truly righteous, with those whose time on earth was aligned perfectly with their purpose, this is more evident. The tales of their final moments, sometimes fantastic, hold their pasts within them. By studying these episodes closely, we can learn of their soul's composition and their unique purpose.[1]

Conqueror of mountains, demolisher of mountains

Rabbah bar Nachmani, known simply as Rabbah, and Rav Yosef were Babylonian Talmudic Sages of the 3rd century. They were lifelong companions in study, often concurring, just as often

disagreeing. After the death of Rav Yehudah ben Yechezkel—the dean of the Pumpedita academy, the towering center of Babylonian Jewish scholarship—Rabbah and Rav Yosef were both seen as viable successors, but the Sages of Babylon were indecisive. Each candidate possessed a quality that was not present in his peer. Rav Yosef was reverently called a "Sinai," a reference to the entire corpus of law given to Moses on that mountain. His knowledge was encyclopedic; it encompassed every law and principle known to man. Rabbah, however, was called "one who uproots mountains," alluding to his incisive dialectics. By contrasting various legal principles, singling out their differences, and reconciling their contradictions, Rabbah arrived at a deeper understanding of the laws than a cursory familiarity with them could provide. Rav Yosef excelled in breadth, Rabbah in depth.

Who was the more appropriate fit for the academy—the fluent scholar or the keen one? The Sages sent their query to their colleagues in Israel, who responded: "Sinai is superior, for all are dependent on the owner of the wheat." Ultimately, they argued, legal decisions can only be based on knowledge of the relevant texts; while a sharp mind is admirable, it cannot function without "the owner of the wheat." Rav Yosef, however, demurred and insisted that Rabbah take the appointment. After Rabbah's passing, Rav Yosef did finally assume the position until his own passing, three years later.[2]

A mourning world

Rabbah passed away in a forest. A detractor had defamed him to the Persian government, claiming that his bi-annual study retreats absented thousands of taxpayers from their homes, causing significant financial loss to the Persian Empire. Pursued by agents, he found refuge in a forest near Agama. The Heavenly Court desired his presence, however, and the Angel of Death was

sent to collect him. When he completed his task, the Sages of Pumpedita sensed their leader was no longer on earth, and went in search of his body. As they neared Agama, they saw a flock of birds stationed there, hovering over a spot in the forest. They understood that his body lay there, and the birds were providing protection for their saintly dean. They attended to his burial, and mourned him for seven days.

The Talmud relates that the natural world, too, bewailed the loss of Rabbah. "On the day he died, a tempest lifted an Arab riding a camel from one side of the Papa River to the other. 'What is the meaning of this?' he asked. When he was told that Rabbah had died, he addressed God, 'Master of the Universe...Rabbah belongs to You, and You belong to Rabbah, why do you destroy the world on his account?' With those words, the storm subsided."[3]

On the day Rav Yosef passed away, there was a similar natural upheaval. A storm threw the rocks that held the bridge over the Euphrates River into the air, so that they touched.[4]

River, garden, and beyond

"*A river flows from Eden to water the garden*".[5] There is a river, says the verse, and it departs from its source, identified as *Eden*, to irrigate a garden—to fashion a verdant field. The garden spoken of is the Garden of Eden, the primordial home of man and woman. Its delectable fruit-trees and lush beauty are derived from the river that brings it life.

The description of the river's journey from Eden to garden is more than just a literal delineation—it is a metaphor for the passage of ideas from their point of origin to their fully realized form as teachable lessons.[6]

A garden offers our senses diverse pleasures, but its delights are presented to us after careful deliberation. The gardener selects

his flowers and trees judiciously, plots their placement with an eye to maximizing their effect, manicures the paths, and trims, prunes, and paves so that the visitor can take joy in the garden, seamlessly. A garden is a classroom. The teacher curates his lessons for the student, just as the horticulturist devises the arrangement of his flowers for the observer. In his garden/classroom, the teacher is meticulous, careful in what he presents, how he presents it, and what he withholds—so that his lesson can provide intellectual delight.

The river that feeds the garden is the entirety of the teacher's intellectual amassment. The river is broad and powerful; its flow is incessant. The teacher's mind surges with all his accumulative knowledge. Every law, idea, axiom, and story he has learned comingles in a great, rushing stream. From that stream he constructs his garden—his carefully chosen lessons.

Opposite the structured beauty of the river and garden, far from its pleasing rationality, is another center of enchantment. Here, it is not digestible information that feeds the mind, but a chaotic, dizzying elixir of creativity. It is the other side of the river, its head, what the verse calls *Eden*. The word *eden* means intense delight, but specifically, it suggests an impermeable delight, something unfathomable.

Perhaps it is the source of creativity itself, an indescribable fountainhead from which all novel thought is eventually assembled. There can be barely perceptible echoes of *Eden* in the river and garden, but it cannot be manifest. It is not fully present in the river and it does not irrigate the garden; it is a world of its own.

There is the rare individual, however, who enters *Eden*, and he does so though exertion.[7] An iron will and relentless perseverance are needed to struggle through an idea's vast landscape in search of its center. Most are content with rivers—with the neatness of

fully realized logic. But few hunger for intellectual friction—the dissonance of divergent ideas and the place that that can lead to.

Rav Yosef was a man of the river; Rabbah was a man of *Eden*.[8] Rav Yosef's erudition is the river's amplitude of knowledge. Rabbah's restless, penetrating mind aligns him with the acute, indecipherable point of knowledge that is found in *Eden*.[9]

A neat passing

The preternatural events on the days on which Rabbah and Rav Yosef passed away call forth the defining themes of their lives. The coherence of a world of law, expansive and copious, is Rav Yosef's passion. When Rav Yosef passes, the Euphrates leaps and clamors, bringing the bridge that spans it to its knees. The broad river is Rav Yosef's world of carefully constructed towers formed from vast rivers of knowledge. Its tumult is a celebration of his life. At his passing, creation revels in Rav Yosef's contribution. The river becomes conspicuous.

A wild passing

Rabbah, though, adores the blinding chaos that is the source of thought.

Therefore, Rabbah passes alone, and is protected by a flock of birds. His unparalleled foray into the heart of reason was a solitary journey. Alone, he perceived *Eden's* secrets. The birds, unrestrained by earth's pull, circling above the domain of man and beast, allude to that rarified plane of spiritual accomplishment. The hush of the forest, the wings of the birds, are a natural expression of Rabbah's lifework. But the fullest telling of his soul, where creation unfolds to reveal Rabbah to us, is in the storm.

"On the day he died, a tempest lifted an Arab riding a camel from one side of the Papa River to the other. 'What is the meaning of

this?' he asked. When he was told that Rabbah died that day, he addressed God, 'Master of the Universe…Rabbah belongs to You, and You belong to Rabbah, why do you destroy the world on his account?' With those words, the storm subsided."

The river, as we have seen, is the symbol of a conventional intellect—the collected waters of rational thought. But this storm upends the natural arrangement where man can reside only within the confines of the river. The Arab and his camel—representative of the typical traveler—are tugged from their comfortable position on steady ground and planted on the "other side of the river"—they are shown the river's head. He does not behold the familiar progression of water, but the seething springs from where it is born. When Rabbah passes away, *Eden* is unleashed on the world.

Yet, the exposure is momentary. The general population subsists on the river's waters. When displaced from its banks, they are jarred by the unpredictability of the river's other side. In *Eden*, everything is possible; every thought can be devastated and rebuilt again with new, sometimes strange outcomes.

Uncomfortable where he is placed, the Arab protests to God: "*Rabbah belongs to You, and You belong to Rabbah, why do you destroy the world on his account?*" God is, of course, the Creator—not only of what the naked eye sees, but of all possibility, of creativity itself. Rabbah's efforts to access the well of creativity and draw novelties from it, mimics the Creator Himself. Thus, Rabbah and God are, in a sense, one.[10] If God's unrelenting creative capacity is showered on the earth, then the order of the earth is threatened. Once its borders have been limned, creation buckles under the weight of God's limitless presence. This is the substance of the Arab's complaint. By allowing Rabbah's unique energy—intertwined with God's—to shine on the day of his passing, the

"world will be destroyed on his account." So the storm subsided. Rabbah's soul flashes through creation for a few scant moments, then ceases. For if it were to endure, the intellect of the masses would be undone; no man would know how, or what, to think.

"Two friends that never part"

Rabbah and Rav Yosef, despite their variances, are inseparable. Both Rabbah's originality and Rav Yosef's mastery are integral to the development of a system of law. Rabbah provides the spark of ingenuity that gives rise to endless formations of ideas. And Rav Yosef streamlines them, shaping the inchoate into applicable laws. In the end, as the Sages of Israel said, instruction must come from the one who possesses the entirety of the Tradition. Rav Yosef's river is what nourishes the nation. His comfort with every law endows him with the rights to the seat of the academy. Rav Yosef ceded his claim to Rabbah, however, and ruled only after the former's passing. Because for there to be a river, there must be an *Eden*. That is why the tempest did occur, and was recorded, because a glimpse of what lies beyond the river is needed to inspire the flow of the river's thought. Certainly, the full import of that originality cannot be laid out, as the Arab and his camel demonstrated. But Rabbah must assert his craft, if only faintly, for Rav Yosef to follow and offer the people a river of ideas and laws.

Adapted from Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, Igrot, pp. 343-345.

Endnotes

1. See *Tanya, Igeret Hakodesh*, §27.
2. Talmud, *Horayot* 14a.
3. Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 86a.
4. Talmud, *Moed Katan* 25b. That passage relates that the same event occurred on the day of Rabbah's passing as well, in addition to the tale of the tempest and the Arab. According to the soon to be explained symbolism of these climatic changes, it will be self-understood that the river's upheaval is linked to Rabbah as well. Though he occupies himself primarily with an analytical system, he certainly partakes of Rav

Yosef's realm as well—the river's body of assimilative knowledge.

5. Genesis 2:10.
6. For the following, see *Likkutei Torah*, *Tzav*, 17a, ff; *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah 5666*, p. 14 ff; *Zohar* II: 123b; *Zohar* I: 247b.
7. *Zohar* I: 130b; see *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah 5666*, p. 104 ff.
8. Like all of existence, their names contain allusions to their respective identities. Yosef means to add, to proliferate. The sheer breadth of his erudition is evoked by a name linked to volume and magnitude. Furthermore, the letters of his name also point to his all-encompassing mind. It is taught that the Mishnah is comprised of 60 tractates, and divided into six orders; the legal Midrash, Torat Kohanim, spans 80 chapters. The first letter of Rav Yosef's name, the infinitesimal *yud*, suggests the humility that is the prerequisite of study. The following three letters, *vav*, *samach*, and *pei*, have the numeric value of 6, 60, and 80 respectively. These numbers allude to the totality of Torah law that Rav Yosef contains within him.
   As for Rabbah, his name means "greatness." In kabbalistic jargon, the word "greatness" refers to the transcendent stations of the Divine hierarchy, the plane of existence that precedes the ordered universe. Rabbah's name thus speaks to a mind that towers above the normalcies of intellect; one that resides in the mysteries that precede rational thought.
9. See *Likkutei Torah*, *Tazria* 24b; see also *Haazinu*, 76d.
10. See the note to *Tanya*, *Likkutei Amarim*, ch. 35.