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# Are the Talmudic Stories a Source of Business and Personal Ethics? The Power of Authentic Storytelling in a New Era

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**Abstract:** *The Talmudic sages used stories as a method to teach ethics and morality. Unlike cases, stories have the ability to arouse passion and teach important lessons. The sages would use biblical figures such as Abraham and Moses and even God, Elijah the prophet, and Satan in their stories to make them memorable. Judaism has a long and rich history of reflection on issues in business ethics and business law. People must conduct themselves in an honest way. Organizations need to recognize some form of corporate social responsibility.*

**Keywords:** *business ethics, ethics, Judaism, Talmudic stories.*

## Introduction

The Talmud is as relevant today as when it was completed more than 1,500 years ago (1). The Talmud has a great deal to say about living an ethical, rewarding life (2). Friedman &

Fischer demonstrate how *Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers), one of the 63 tractates of the Talmud, can be used to make the world a better place (3). There is a great deal of interest in the Talmud today, especially in much of Asia (4). 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 (5). The Talmud is also popular in China; there is a belief that it can give one an edge in conducting business (6). Solomon considers that the Talmud is one of the most influential, though seldom

acknowledged or properly understood, writings of Late Antiquity (7).

Jewish written law is contained in the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses, i.e., the Torah). The Talmud, Judaism's Oral Law, is primarily a collection of rabbinical discussions and commentaries on the Torah's written text. The Talmud was compiled separately in academies in Israel and Babylonia; it explains, expounds, and elaborates on the Hebrew Bible and consists of the *Mishna* and *Gemara*. Thus, there are two versions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem Talmud, a product of the academies in Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud, a product of the academies in Babylon.

The *Mishna*, originally an old oral tradition, was compiled and redacted by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (*Nasi* means President, he was the President of the Sanhedrin), known as Rebbi, about the year 189 C.E. The *Gemara*, in the Babylonian Talmud, which consists mainly of commentaries and discussions on the *Mishna*, was completed in approximately 500 C.E. The Jerusalem Talmud was probably completed about 400 C.E. One major difference between the two Talmuds is that about one-third of the Babylonian Talmud consists of aggadic material (homiletics) vs. one-sixth of the Jerusalem Talmud. In

addition, the Aramaic language used in the Jerusalem Talmud is not the same as that of the Babylonian Talmud (8). The Babylonian Talmud, considerably larger than the Jerusalem Talmud, is more authoritative. Both often use a case-method type of approach to illustrate a particular problem or a proposed solution.

The Talmud, though mainly concerned with *halacha* (Jewish law), also provides a detailed record of the beliefs of the Jewish people, their philosophy, traditions, culture, and folklore, i.e., the *aggadah* (homiletics) and 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.

Z. H. Chajes states that the aim of the homiletic portion of the Talmud (*aggadah*) was to inspire people to serve the Lord. Also, if the lecturer noticed that the audience was not paying attention or was dozing off, he might tell stories which "sounded strange or terrifying or which went beyond the limits of the natural and so won the attention of his audience for his message" (9). Maimonides (1135 - 1204) describes individuals who take the homiletics of the Talmud literally as simple-minded fools, since there are hidden inner



meanings in the stories, riddles, parables, etc. used in *aggadah* (Maimonides, Sanhedrin, Introduction to the Mishna, Chapter 10). Eisen notes that many respected scholars viewed *aggadah* as a parable or “rhetorical invention” for an educational or ethical purpose (10). Thus, we see that the stories told in the Talmud and Midrash, many of which are cited here, were not necessarily meant to be taken literally. Literal or not, these stories have important messages.

### **Power of Storytelling**

The sages of the Talmud were not historians; they told stories. These stories are an ideal way of communicating important truths ranging from ethics to theology.

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 (11).

Many of the Talmudic stories were redacted hundreds of years after the events in the story took place. There are stories in the Talmud about biblical figures; the Talmud has many stories about Abraham and Moses. Elijah the prophet also appears in several Talmudic stories. Even stories of *Tannaim* told by *Amoraim* might have been redacted hundreds of years later.

Rubenstein 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 completely true, partially true, or a metaphor (11).

There is no question that stories are an effective way of teaching people lessons. In fact, according to Charlie Rose, talk show host, “What sets TED talks apart is that the big ideas are wrapped up in personal stories” (12). Stories made up more than 65% of the content of the 500 most popular TED talks (13). This is why founding stories are used as a simple way to connect with stakeholders such as customers, investors, and employees (14).

The creation myth is not an asset just for startups. As those businesses grow into established firms and

individual founders figure less prominently, the origin story can serve as both a road map and moral compass. Keeping that story alive, keeping it true, and keeping it relevant- these are the challenges more mature businesses must contend with (14).

Storytelling skills are important in the business world (12). Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment Group, was once trying to convince the mayor of Las Vegas to provide funding to support a new baseball stadium. He realized that the PowerPoint presentations filled with numbers were not doing the trick. It occurred to him that if you want to persuade others, a good story is more effective. The trick is to aim for a person's heart and soul, not brain. The following quote from Guber says it all: "Stories have a unique power to move people's hearts, minds, feet, and wallets in the storyteller's intended direction" (12). One firm that discovered how impactful storytelling can be in getting employees to be engaged was KPMG, one of the big four accounting firms that is also into consulting.

KPMG actually came up with a pretty extensive study not too long ago- they found that morale was declining somewhat. They were having all of those issues, especially around young people, that many

global companies are having these days. And here's where it saves us all a lot of work. They studied thousands of managers, and they sent out thousands of studies and surveys. And they came to the conclusion that people, young people, especially, wanted to be part of a bigger mission. A purpose. OK. We're starting to understand that. That's fine. Now, how do you teach them about the purpose of your company? Through storytelling.

So they literally took their managers, and helped transform them all into storytellers, so that the managers were constantly telling stories of the history of KPMG- how KPMG has shaped the world; how they continue to shape industries and lives, and make the world a better place. And they said as they got immersed in the storytelling culture, engagement scores went up substantially. Turnover was reduced substantially. And this is a study that is online. They've broken it down. They're showing to you empirically how profits began to soar. So in all of those empirical models that we look at, storytelling helped transform that company in a big way (15).

Xerox discovered that repair personnel used stories rather than information in manuals as a way of finding out what was wrong with a machine. These stories were collected

and are now part of a database (Eureka) that is worth millions to Xerox (16). Medical schools are teaching future physicians to listen empathetically to patients' ailments. These ailments are told in narrative form and the ability to interpret and respond to the stories is crucial if a doctor wants to heal the patient (16).

Friedman, Lynch & Herskovitz posit that ethics should be taught using a variety of tools ranging from YouTube videos to films to songs. They feel that cases, because they are limited to facts, generally lack the ability to "arouse the passion" of other approaches (17). Stories, even fiction, provide another method to teach ethics (18, 19). Stories have the ability to arouse passion and teach important lessons. Aesop's fables are often used by teachers to instruct disciples.

The Talmudic sages were not ivory tower scholars. They worked at all kinds of professions.

The sages of the Talmud worked at many diverse occupations. For instance, Hillel was a woodchopper before he became the Nasi (President of the Sanhedrin) and Shammai the Elder was a builder. Rabbi Yochanan b. Zakkai was a businessman for forty years; Abba Shaul was a gravedigger; Abba Chilkiyah was a field worker; Abba Oshiya was a launderer; Rabbi Shimon P'kuli was a cotton dealer;

Rabbi Shmuel b. Shilas was a school teacher, Rabbi Meir and Rabi Chananel were scribes; Rabbi Yosi b. Chalafta was a tanner; Rabbi Yochanan Hasandlar was a shoemaker; Rabbi Yehoshua b. Chananiah was a blacksmith; Rabbi Safra and Rabbi Dimi of Nehardea were merchants; Rabbi Abba b. Zavina was a tailor; Rabbi Yosef b. Chiya and Rabbi Yannai owned vineyards; Rabbi Huna was a farmer and raised cattle; Rabbi Chisda and Rabbi Papa were beer brewers; Karna was a wine smeller (he determined which wine could be stored and which had to be sold immediately); Rabbi Chiya b. Yosef was in the salt business; Abba Bar Abba, (father of Mar Shmuel) was a silk merchant; and (Mar) Shmuel was a doctor (20).

This paper relies heavily on translations by Soncino and ArtScroll. The Soncino translation of the Talmud is available for free on the Internet. They may be found at: <http://www.halakhah.com/>. Translations of the Talmud may also be found at the Sefaria website, <http://www.sefaria.org/>. There is a search engine at the Sefaria website that is extremely useful.

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.

### Learning Torah on One Foot

What is the most important principle, i.e., main core value, of Judaism? This story answers the question.

There was another incident involving a certain gentile who came before Shammai and said to him: "convert me to Judaism on condition that you will teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot." Upon hearing these words, Shammai pushed him away with the builder's ruler he was holding in his hand [Shammai was a builder]. The gentile came before Hillel, and asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel said to him: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the entire Torah all the rest is an elaboration of this one, central point; Now, go and learn it." (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 31a; based on ArtScroll translation).

The commentaries have difficulty with this. While it is true that many of the Torah's laws deal with how people should behave with each other (more than 100 of the Torah's 613 precepts deal with business ethics), many deal with the relationship between man and God (e.g., observing the Sabbath, having a mezuzah on the doorpost, etc.). One answer given is that Hillel was referring to the majority of the

precepts (see commentary of Rashi). It is quite possible, however, that Hillel was hinting at his approach to law. If the core value of Judaism deals with laws between human and human, then it is reasonable to use legal remedies such as *tikkun olam* (using the legal system to repair the world and make it a better place for everyone), *darkei shalom* (the ways of peace), *dracheha darkei noam* (the ways of the Torah are pleasantness) and *kvod habriot* (human dignity) to make adjustments (*takanot*) when necessary (21). The reason for this is that a text-based law can sometimes have the opposite effect of the original intent of the lawgiver as circumstances change. In fact, Hillel instituted the *Prosbul* (a document that in effect transfers a loan to the court, which may collect the debt on behalf of the creditor) when he observed that people refused to lend poor people money before the Sabbatical year (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 36a). According to Torah law (Deuteronomy 15), the creditor is not permitted to collect his loan after the Sabbatical year. A potential creditor who uses a *Prosbul*, no longer fearing that the debt will be canceled by the Sabbatical year, will therefore be willing to lend money to the needy. The Talmud enacted other rules using the principle of "not to close the door in the face of borrowers" (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin49b).

Similarly, the Talmud saw a problem with an absolutist approach to truth. This is the correct way to behave in almost all situations but can cause strife in others. The Talmudists found hints in the Torah itself that God Himself lied to ensure peace between husband and wife for more about when lying is permissible under Jewish law (22). The Hillel School saw all kinds of problems in taking an absolutist, text-based approach to law and were more concerned with the intent of the law.

Consistent with this view of the importance of laws between people is the Talmudic belief that the first question one is asked in the afterlife at the final judgment is: "Were you honest in your business dealings?" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 31a). In Avos, we have a business version of the golden rule: "Let the money of your fellow be as precious to you as your own" (Avos 2:12).

### **God Teaches Moses About the Importance of Compassion**

One of God's attributes (Exodus 34:6) is "*erech apayim*" which is translated as long suffering or slow to anger. In this story, God, the Omniscient One, teaches Moses about compassion. According to the Torah, Moses spent forty days in Heaven with God before coming down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. This provides the

Talmud with ample opportunities to use discussions between God and Moses to teach humankind valuable lessons about ethics.

When Moses ascended on high [to Heaven in order to receive the Torah], 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. Moses said to God: Let the wicked perish. God said to Moses: See now that which you desire [i.e., 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 said to me to be, be slow to anger but only to the righteous? Moses replied to God: And did You not say to 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 great according as You have spoken, saying" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a-111b).

The true power of God is seen by his forbearance and restraint when dealing with the sinner. By being slow to anger, God gives the wrongdoer plenty of time to repent. Leaders have to be patient with people and slow to anger. There are several research studies that have found that

compassion and kindness on the part of leaders are correlated with productivity and profitability (23). Furthermore, employees that have compassionate leaders are much more likely to be physically and mentally healthy than those with bad bosses (23). Seppälä, 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” (24).

#### **Compassion for all of God’s Creations**

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 [probably an exaggeration]. The Talmud provides the reason why Rebbi was punished with this much suffering.

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.” Rebbi was afflicted with a kidney stone and suffered immensely for thirteen years.

And the suffering left as a result of an 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 [God’s] compassion is upon all his creations.” They then said in heaven: “Since he is now compassionate, let us show compassion to him” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metziah 85a; Based on ArtScroll translation)

This memorable story not only dramatizes the importance of compassion on the part of leaders but also 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* (Jewish method of slaughter of the animal); it has to be extremely sharp without any nicks. Humane handling of farm animals has become a big issue in the United States. Wendy’s is one example of a company that is switching to 100% cage-free eggs by 2020. Tyson Foods, on the other hand, has been accused of cruelty to animals (25). There is an organization, Compassion in World Farming (<http://www.ciwf.org.uk/>) that is working on ending factory farming. They are currently trying to convince Publix Supermarkets to switch to cage-free eggs.

### **The Ethics of Abba Chilkiyah**

When we teach students about business ethics, we sometimes forget that business ethics is a two-way street: Employers must behave in an ethical manner but employees must also act in a proper way. As noted above, almost all the sages of the Talmud had jobs—Abba Chilkiyah was a field laborer.

Abba Chilkiyah was a grandson of Choni the Circle Maker, and whenever the world was in need of rain the Rabbis sent a message to him and he prayed and rain fell. Once there was an urgent need for rain and the Rabbis sent to him a couple of scholars to ask him to pray for rain. They came to his house but they did not find him there. They then proceeded to the fields and they found him there hoeing. They greeted him but he took no notice of them. Towards evening he gathered some wood and placed the wood and the rake on one shoulder and his cloak on the other shoulder. Throughout the journey he walked barefoot but when he reached a stream he put his shoes on to cross it. When he came to an area of thorns and thistles he lifted up his garments thus exposing his legs to the thorns. When he reached the town, his wife adorned with jewelry came out to meet him. When he arrived home, his wife entered the house first, then he, and then the

scholars. He sat down to eat but he did not say to the scholars, 'Join me'. He then shared the meal among his children, giving the older son one portion and the younger child two portions. He said to his wife: "I know the scholars have come on account of the rain, let us go up to the roof and pray, perhaps the Holy One, Blessed be He, will have mercy and rain will fall; and we will not have to take credit for ourselves for making it rain." They went up to the roof. He stood in one corner and she in another. At first, the clouds appeared over the corner where his wife stood. When he came down from the roof, he said to the scholars: "Why have you come here?" They replied: "The Rabbis have sent us to you, Sir, to ask you to pray for rain." Thereupon he exclaimed: "Blessed be God, who has made you no longer dependent on Abba Chilkiyah." They replied: "We know that the rain has come on your account, but tell us, master, the meaning of these mysterious acts of yours, which are puzzling to us? Why did you not take notice of us when we greeted you?" He answered: "I was hired as a dayworker, and I said to myself I must not interrupt my work even for a moment to greet you." They then asked: "And why did you, master, carry the wood on one shoulder and the cloak on the other shoulder?" He replied: "It was a borrowed cloak; I borrowed it for the

purpose of wearing, and not for any other purpose [to carry wood on it]. They then asked him: "Why did you, master, go barefoot throughout the whole journey but when you came to a stream you put your shoes on?" He replied: "What was on the road I could see but not what was in the water" [he was afraid of stepping on something dangerous]. They asked: "Why did you, master, lift up your garments when you came to a place of thorns and thistles?" He replied: This [the leg] heals itself, but the other [the garment] does not." They asked: "Why did your wife come out adorned in jewelry to meet you, master, when you entered the city?" He replied: "In order that I should have no desire to glance on any other woman." They asked: "Why, master, did she enter the house first, and you after her, and then we?" He replied: "Because I did not know your character" [Abba did not feel it was right to leave his wife outside with two strangers]. They asked: "Why, master, did you not ask us to join you in the meal? He replied: "Because there was not sufficient food for all and you would have declined my invitation. I therefore said that it would not be right to cause the rabbis to give me credit for nothing" [Inviting people to a meal knowing they will refuse is a form of dishonesty.] They asked: "Why did you give one portion to the older son

and two portions to the younger?" He replied: "Because the one stays at home [and has access to food] and the other is away in the synagogue studying the whole day." They asked: "Why, master, did the clouds appear first in the corner where your wife stood and then in your corner?" He replied: "Because a wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor which they can immediately enjoy and I give them money which they cannot enjoy immediately. Or perhaps it may have to do with certain robbers in our neighborhood. I prayed that they might die, but she prayed that they might repent; and they did repent (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 23a-23b; based on translation by Soncino and ArtScroll).

There are many lessons in this story. The importance of being an honest laborer is one of them. Abba Chilkiyah did not waste time since he was paid for the day. We expect employers to be ethical when it comes to paying wages but employees must also be ethical and be productive. Nowadays, with smart phones and the Internet, it is so easy for employees to waste time that technically belongs to the employer. Abba Chilkiyah's ethics extended to a borrowed garment and he would not use it for another purpose. Clearly, he was very careful with the property belonging to others. The relationship between Abba Chilkiyah and his wife



is interesting. Women often dress up to go out when being seen by others; for their own husbands, an old bathrobe may be adequate. Abba's wife dressed up for her husband when he came home from work. Abba's great humility is also evident: he did not want to receive credit for making it rain. He also had no issue with admitting that his wife was more compassionate than he was: she was successful in her prayer that the robbers repent.

#### **The Business Ethics of Shimon ben Shetach: The Hidden Jewel**

Shimon ben Shetach (c. 120- 40 BCE) was the Nasi (President) of the Sanhedrin during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus. His sister, Salome Alexandra, was the wife of Alexander Jannaeus, and succeeded her husband to the throne.

It is told of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah that he once purchased a donkey from an Arab. When the rabbi's disciples came, they discovered a valuable jewel was hanging from the donkey's neck, hidden from view. They said to Rabbi Shimon: "Master, 'It is the blessing of the Lord that makes one rich'" (Proverbs 10:22). Rabbi Shimon replied: "I purchased a donkey; I did not purchase a precious stone." He went and returned the jewel to the Arab, who thereupon said: "Blessed be the Lord God of Shimon ben

Shetach" (Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Metzia 2:5).

Proverbs 10 also states that "A deceitful scale makes one a pauper" (Proverbs 10:4) and "Charity saves from death" (Proverbs 10:2). Rabbi Shimon's students felt that God was rewarding their teacher with the precious jewel that was hidden on the donkey's neck. Rabbi Shimon knew better: Taking money that one is not entitled to is not the way of the righteous person of which it is said (Proverbs 11: 23): "The desire of the righteous is only for the good."

#### **Mar Zutra the Pious: Simple Test of Honesty**

Mar Zutra the Pious was once involved in an incident in which a silver cup was stolen from his host. Later, he saw a disciple wash his hands and dry them on someone else's garment. Mar Zutra said: "This is the person who stole the cup, as he has no consideration for the property of his neighbor." The disciple was then bound, and he confessed to the crime (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 24a; based on translation of Soncino and ArtScroll).

This follows a Talmudic discussion of returning lost objects. When it comes to righteous scholars known to only tell the truth, lost objects may be returned to them based solely on visual recognition. Anyone else has to

provide an identifying mark before the object is returned. Otherwise, anyone can claim to have lost the object. The Talmud has a discussion regarding when scholars are permitted to lie (22). Any scholar who is known to be inconsiderate of other people's property is also disqualified from being able to reclaim a lost object on the basis of visual recognition; this means that he will have to provide an identifying mark (Meiri). Apparently, we only trust people to claim lost objects on the basis of visual recognition alone if they are known to never lie (except in the special cases where white lies are permitted) and are considerate of other people's property.

#### **Business Ethics: Story of the Porters and Rabbah bar Bar-Chana**

The following story demonstrates how Rabbah bar Bar-Chana was asked to follow "the way of the pious," probably because he was one of the Talmudic sages and therefore a role model for the other members of society. He was told to practice the highest form of ethics.

Some porters negligently broke a barrel of wine belonging to Rabbah bar Bar-Chana who then confiscated the porters' garments as restitution. Rav, the judge, advised Rabbah to return the property belonging to the porters. Rabbah asked Rav whether this was indeed the law and was

quoted the following verse from Proverbs (2:20): "In order that you may walk in the way of the good ..."  
The porters then complained to Rav that they were poor, had worked all day without earning anything, and were in need.

Rav told Rabbah to pay them. Rabbah again asked whether this was the law. Rav responded with the conclusion of the verse from Proverbs: "... and keep the paths of the righteous" (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia, 83a).

The Talmud sees going beyond the requirements of the law - *lifnim mishurat hadin* (literally, inside the line of the law)- as a Torah requirement; obeying the strict letter of the law is not enough. According to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 30b), Jerusalem was destroyed for following the strict letter of Torah law and not doing more than the law required. This principle of Jewish law, that demands that one go beyond the basic requirements of the law, is actually derived from the verse (Exodus 18:20) "And you shall instruct them about the statutes and the laws, and you shall make known to them the path in which they should go and the work that they should do" [note the redundancies] and (Deuteronomy 6:18): "You shall do that which is fair and good in the

sight of the Lord” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 30b, 16b).

The concept of doing what is “fair and good” provides the Talmudic sages with the legal ability to use their judgment and demand more than the strict letter of the law demands. This is reminiscent of the system in old English law known as “equity”. Courts of equity, as compared to courts of common-law, dealt with the unfairness and injustices that arose because of the strict application of traditional law.

#### **Learning About Business Ethics from Rabbi Huna’s Wine that Became Vinegary**

When a business deal mysteriously goes bad, many people take it is a sign that they have to be more deceptive and sneaky. Some people check their *mezuzot* when something bad happens. This story takes a different approach.

Rabbi Huna had 400 barrels of wine that turned into vinegar. Rabbi Yehuda the brother of Rabbi Salla Chasida, as well as other sages came to see him. And some say that it was Rabbi Adda bar Ahavah and other sages who went to see him. They said to him: “Let the master [Rabbi Huna] examine his deeds to determine the reason for his loss.” Rabbi Huna was taken aback and said: “Do you suspect me of wrongdoing?” The

sages replied to him: “Do you think that God would punish someone without cause?” Rabbi Huna asked if anyone had heard of something wrong that he had done that must be rectified. They said to him: “This is what we heard about you: the master did not give his sharecropper the grapevines that were due him” [sharecroppers are also entitled to a portion of the branches pruned off the grapevines]. Rabbi Huna responded: “Did he leave me any of them? He stole all of them from me!” [i.e., the sharecropper had cheated him by taking more than his due.] The sages did not accept this explanation telling him: “This is an example of the popular saying: ‘Steal from a thief and you also feel the taste of stealing’.” [In other words, Rabbi Huna was wrong in taking the law into his own hands by “stealing” the vines despite the fact that he actually had a legitimate claim against the dishonest sharecropper.] Rabbi Huna agreed to give the sharecropper the vines coming to him. Some say that a miracle then occurred and the vinegar reverted to wine. And others say that the price of vinegar rose, so that his vinegar sold at the price of wine (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 5b; based on ArtScroll translation).

Either way, this story demonstrates that one who behaves ethically is successful, and one who commits an injustice- even one that can be

rationalized- may be punished by God. The Talmud believes that if something bad happens to a person, that individual should examine his/her deeds and see if an injustice was committed by the person. Incidentally, the number 400 in the story may be symbolic. In the Torah, Abraham pays the outrageous sum of 400 shekels when purchasing the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:16). Ephron is considered a wicked person by the Talmud for taking advantage of Abraham who desperately needed a burial plot for Sarah, his wife, when she passed away (Genesis 23). Ephron's behavior is reminiscent of the way many pharmaceutical companies act by overcharging for drugs. Martin Shkreli, CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals, is a modern day Ephron. He raised the price of Daraprim, a 62-year old drug, from \$13.50 a tablet to \$750. Valeant Pharmaceuticals has also been criticized for raising the price of several old drugs; the price of Isuprel, a heart medication, increased by 500% (26).

Judaism has a long and rich history of reflection on issues in business ethics and business law. Judaism admits the legitimacy of business, properly built. People must conduct themselves in an honest way. Organizations need to recognize some form of corporate social

responsibility. The economic well-being at the individual, organizational, or national level is ineluctable connected to ethical values (27).

### **The Good Deeds of Rabbi Huna**

Rava said to Rafram b. Papa: "Tell me some of the good deeds which Rabbi Huna has done. He replied: "Of his childhood I do not recollect anything, but from his old age I do." On cloudy and windy days they would carry him about in a golden palanquin and he would inspect every part of the city and he would order the demolition of any wall that was unsafe. If the owner was in a position to do so, he had to rebuild it himself; but if not, then Rabbi Huna would have it rebuilt at his own expense. Every Friday afternoon, he would send a messenger to the market when it was about to close and any vegetables that the growers had left over he would buy and had them thrown into the river.

The Talmud asks: "Why throw them away? Let him give the vegetables to the poor." He was afraid the poor would then at times be led to rely upon Rabbi Huna and would not trouble to buy any for themselves [then they would have no vegetables for the Sabbath if there were no leftover vegetables]. Why did he not give the vegetables to the domestic animals? Rabbi Huna was of the

opinion that food fit for human consumption may not be given to animals. Then why did he purchase them at all? This would cause the growers to refrain in the future from providing an adequate supply of vegetables so he purchased the leftovers.

Whenever Rabbi Huna discovered some new medicine not available to the public, he would fill a water jug with it and suspend it from the doorframe of the house and proclaim: "Whoever desires it let him come and take of it."... When he had a meal, he would open the door wide and declare, "Whoever is in need of food, let him come and eat." Rava said: "All these things I could myself carry out except the last one because the troops of poor people in Mechuzah are too numerous" (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 20b; based on translation of Soncino and ArtScroll).

One reading the above two stories about Rabbi Huna (c. 212 - c. 297) would surmise that he was very wealthy. He actually started out extremely poor, so impoverished that he had to borrow money in order to purchase wine to use for *Kiddush* on the Sabbath. He used his belt as collateral and had to replace it with a belt made out of grass. When Rav, his teacher, saw him dressed like that and found out what he had done, he blessed him as follows: "May it be the

will of God that you be totally covered in silk." The blessing must have worked because Rabbi Huna became very wealthy. In fact, one time, Rabbi Huna, who was extremely short, was lying on a bed [it seems that he was not noticed] and his daughter and daughters-in-law came to the house and threw their expensive silk garments on the bed so that he was literally covered in silk (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 27b). The Talmud adds that when Rav found out how well his blessing worked, he was upset with Rabbi Huna. He told him that after he had been blessed, he should have replied, "Any you too should be similarly blessed." It is polite to say to someone who blesses you, "the same to you".

The above story demonstrates that wealthy people have to use their wealth to help their communities, i.e., social responsibility. Rabbi Huna was concerned with repairing dilapidated structures. In the United States, more than one out of nine bridges are rated as being structurally deficient. The average age of the 607,380 bridges in the United States in 2013 was 42 years (28). It is only a matter of time before people die when bridges start collapsing; indeed, a few bridges have already collapsed. On August 1, 2007, the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis buckled and 13 people died as a result. Note how concerned Rabbi Huna was with making medications

available to everyone. This story demonstrates his great love for the Sabbath. He wanted to ensure that everyone would have vegetables to enjoy on the holiest day of the week. Any person who walks around with a belt made of grass in order to have wine for the Sabbath Kiddush clearly loves the Sabbath. His strategy of dumping the vegetables in the river is explained by the commentaries as dumping them into the river in a way that the currents would carry them off to another town. The vegetables would not go to waste (*baal tashchit*, wanton destruction and waste, is prohibited by Jewish law; see <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/bal-tashhit-the-torah-prohibits-wasteful-destruction/>) but would be consumed by people living downstream.

### **Abba: The Compassionate Surgeon**

According to the Talmud, "The best of doctors are destined for Hell" (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 82a). Several reasons are provided including the fact that doctors are often arrogant and will not consult with other physicians and thus cause a patient to die. Also, many refuse to treat the indigent. Here is a story of one who did things right.

Abba Umna was a surgeon/bloodletter (*umna*) and would receive greetings from the Heavenly Academy every day. Abaye

received greetings on every Sabbath eve, Raba on the eve of every Day of Atonement. Abaye felt dejected because of the special honor shown to Abba Umna. People said to Abaye: "You are not able to perform deeds such as his." What was the special merit of Abba Umna? When he performed his operations he would separate men from women [for modesty reasons]. He had a garment which had a cup for receiving the blood and which was slit at the shoulder to accommodate the surgeon's knife. Whenever a woman patient came to him he would put the garment on her shoulder in order not to see her exposed body. He also had a private place where the patients deposited their fees which he would charge; those that could afford it put their fees there, and thus those who could not pay were not embarrassed. Whenever a young scholar happened to consult him, he would not accept any fee from him. When the scholar would leave, he would give him money and tell him: "Go and regain your health."

One day Abaye sent to him two scholars in order to test him. He received them and gave them food and drink and in the evening he prepared woolen mattresses for them to sleep on. In the morning the scholars rolled these together and took them to the marketplace for sale.

There they met Abba and they said to him: "Sir, value these, how much are they worth?" Abba replied: "Such-and-such." They said to him: "Perhaps they are worth more?" Abba replied: "This is what I paid for them." They then said to him, They are yours, we took them away from you; tell us, pray, of what did you suspect us. He replied: "I said to myself, perhaps the rabbis needed money to redeem captives and they were ashamed to tell me." They replied, Sir, take them back. He answered: "From the moment I missed them I dismissed them from my mind and assigned them to charity". Raba was dejected because of the special honor shown to Abaye and he was therefore told: "Be content that through your merit the whole city is protected" (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 21b-22a; based on translation by Soncino and ArtScroll).

This is a story used to teach business ethics. Abba Umna was concerned with the health of his patients and was not interested in becoming wealthy. Moreover, he was even concerned about such issues as patient modesty. He was also very charitable.

Jewish ethical commandments are directed first to the community and only after to individual members of the community. The social responsibility of business does not

consider business an entity in itself, independent of the social system. The most impactful argument in favor of business responsibility is that society supplies the mandate for business's existence and that business must therefore react and respond to changes in society (29).

### **The Secret of How to Preserve One's Wealth: Story of Nakdimon b. Gurion's Daughter**

Rabbi Yochanan b. Zakkai was once riding on a donkey leaving Jerusalem, and his disciples were walking behind him. He saw a young woman picking kernels of barley out of the dung of cattle belonging to Arabs. When she saw him, she covered her face with her hair and stood before him. She said to Rabbi Yochanan: "My master, feed me." He replied: "My daughter, who are you?" She replied: "I am the daughter of Nakdimon b. Guryon." He asked her: "My daughter, what became of your father's wealth?" She replied: "Is there not a proverb in Jerusalem: The salt [way to preserve it] of wealth is its diminution [by charity] and some say the "salt of money is benevolence." Rabbi Yochanan asked her: "And what of your father-in-law's money?" She replied: "one destroyed the other." [the combining of the money from the two sources resulted in the loss of both]. She said to him: "Rabbi, do you remember when you signed on my

marriage contract (*kesubah*)?" He said to his students: "I remember when I signed her marriage contract and I read in it that her father gave her a dowry of one million golden denars besides that which she was promised by her father-in-law." Rabbi Yochanan b. Zakkai then burst into tears and said: "Happy are you, O Israel. As long as you perform the will of God, no nation or people can rule over you; but when you fail to perform the will of God you are delivered into the hands of a lowly nation. And not into the hands of the lowly nation itself, but also into the hands of the animals of the lowly nation!"

Is it true that Nakdimon b. Guryon did not give sufficient charity? Behold we are taught in a *Baraitha*: "It was said of Nakdimon b. Guryon that when he left his house to go to the house of study, the entire path on which he walked on would be spread out with fine woolens and the poor people would come and fold them up behind him [for their own use]. If you prefer, I will say that he did it only for his own honor, and if you prefer, I will explain that he did not give a sufficient amount of charity. As people say: "According to the strength of the camel is the load" [the wealthier the man the greater the responsibility].

We are taught in a *Baraitha* that Rabbi Elazar b. Tzadok said:

"May I so live to see the consolation [a form of oath], if I did not see her in Acco picking barley from between the hoofs of the horses (Babylonian Talmud, Kethubos 66a-67b; based on translations by ArtScroll and Sefaria).

This probably happened after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Nakdimon ben Gurion was one of the three extremely affluent people living in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Second Temple (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a). The lessons of this story are obvious. Rich people have an obligation to help the poor. Ideally, charity should be given anonymously and not for the purpose of being honored. The Hebrew word for charity, *tzedaka*, actually means righteousness and justice. One is obligated to give charity and should not see as a kindness which is optional.

This story also hints at the fact that one may be rich today but that does not guarantee that s/he will always be wealthy. If people help each other, then we can have a society where there is very little poverty. Recent studies indicate that the chance of experiencing poverty at some point in one's life is more than 50%. The good news is that poverty usually lasts between one and three years and only a small number of people remain poor for an extended period of time (30). Marriage and education can change



these probabilities. It is, however, clear that the risk of becoming poor is much higher than people think.

Tamari has the following to say about charity:

All the Codes rank the types of charity in a descending order, one that has much significance for present-day welfare issues. At the highest level is the charity that provides employment, makes available funds or knowledge enabling the unemployed or the poor to establish a business, or that in any way prevents people from sinking into poverty and enables them to break the poverty cycle. At the macroeconomic level this would be translated into public policy of providing employment, technical education and appropriate funding for new business, rather than a continuation of handouts of basic necessities that only perpetuates poverty (31). If it is not possible for the individual to fund the needs of the poor they are obligated to bring it to the notice of the authorities so they may then use tax money to solve the problem (Ramah, Yoreh Deah, section 250, subsection 1).

Jewish business ethics needs to continue to self-consciously promote models of aspirations, as well as rely on fixed legal norms (27).

It is interesting to observe that the poorest Americans are more generous

than the wealthiest Americans; the wealthiest donate 1.3% of their income and the poorest, 3.2% (32).

Paul Piff, a psychologist at UC Berkeley, published research that correlated wealth with an increase in unethical behavior: "While having money doesn't necessarily make anybody anything," Piff later told New York magazine, "the rich are way more likely to prioritize their own self-interests above the interests of other people." They are, he continued, "more likely to exhibit characteristics that we would stereotypically associate with, say, a holes." In a series of controlled experiments, lower-income people and people who identified themselves as being on a relatively low social rung were consistently more generous with limited goods than upper-class participants were. Notably, though, when both groups were exposed to a sympathy-eliciting video on child poverty, the compassion of the wealthier group began to rise, and the groups' willingness to help others became almost identical (32).

### **Concern for the Environment**

A certain man was clearing his field and clearing stones from his property onto the neighboring public domain. A pious man found him doing so and said to him: "Empty one! Why do you remove stones from property which is not yours to property which is

yours?" The man laughed at him. Some days later, he had to sell his field, and when he was walking in that public domain he tripped over those stones. He said: "How well did that pious man say to me, 'Why do you remove stones from property which is not yours to property which is yours?'" (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 50b)

This story is used to illustrate the law that "A person should not remove stones from his ground on to public ground." In many countries, there are problems with companies that dispose of pollutants into the atmosphere or rivers. Since 2009, General Electric has been removing PCBs from the Upper Hudson River. They removed 300,000 pounds of PCBs. Air pollution kills 3.3 million people a year. Ramsey provides a list of the 10 cities with the worst air pollution (33). Volkswagen admitted to using software to cheat on emissions testing. This cheating affected 11 million cars made by Volkswagen and the company expects this scandal to cost it \$18 billion (34).

Pollution is an example of what economists refer to a negative externality. Externalities are spillover effects which adversely affect a third party. Economists have come up with all kinds of solutions to solve the problem of negative externalities.

### **Two Stories Involving Elijah the Prophet**

According to an ancient tradition, Elijah the Prophet would visit pious people. As we shall see, sages were able to learn a great deal from him. We can see the ideal way to feed waiters from this story. Clearly, it is painful for waiters to serve people food and not be able to partake of it.

The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Kethuboth 61a) relates that there were two pious people: one gave the waiter a share of the served courses after the guests finished eating their meal (Rashi, a major commentator, notes that he did give the waiters something to eat before working so they would not be famished); the other let the waiter have a share of each course as he served it. It is painful to serve people food and have to wait until the end of the meal before being allowed to taste it. It is not difficult to imagine a waiter serving something very pungent and delicious and not being able to eat the dish until all the guests have been served. Actually, most people would not give any special dishes to the waiter; this is something only a pious person would do. In any case, Elijah conversed only with the one who allowed the waiters to eat first and would not speak to the person who waited until the end of the meal to provide the waiters with food. This is the Talmudic way of

showing the ideal way to treat waiters if one wants the privilege of being able to talk to Elijah the prophet. Elijah does not speak to people who are willing to cause even the slightest discomfort to another person (21).

The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Kethuboth 106a) relates that Elijah frequently visited Rabbi Anan, author of Tanna Debe Eliyahu, which means teachings of Elijah (Elijah is Eliyahu in Hebrew). Apparently, Elijah the Prophet visited him and taught him this Midrash (some disagree with this and claim that Eliyahu was the name of a Talmudic scholar). The book consists of two parts: Seder Eliyahu Rabbah and Seder Eliyahu Zuta (rabbah means large or great and zuta means small; the second part is much smaller than the first part). Elijah stopped seeing Rabbi Anan because he inadvertently caused problems for orphans who were involved in a lawsuit. He was indirectly responsible for a miscarriage of justice involving the orphans. Rabbi Anan fasted and prayed until finally Elijah visited him again. However, he was unable to look at Elijah out of fear; he was no longer at the same spiritual level because of his transgression. He completed his studies with Elijah but had to be in a box so he would not have to look at Elijah. The second part (the smaller portion) was taught to him when he was in the box (21).

The above two stories demonstrate how important it is to go beyond the requirements of the law. It is not enough to simply follow the law if one wants to be held in high esteem by Elijah.

#### **Two Shopkeepers in Jerusalem: Elazar b. Tzadok and Abba Saul b. Batnit**

Rabbi Elazar b. Tzadok and Abba Saul b. Batnit were shopkeepers; one sold oil and the other sold wine. The way people purchased oil and wine was as follows: The shopkeeper had huge barrels of oil and wine and various measuring cups. The customer brought his own vessel which was filled by the shopkeeper using his measuring cups. A common measure in Talmudic times was a *log* which was equal to the volume of six eggs (some say that a *log* is equivalent to 15.2 fl. oz.; others feel that it is 13.2 fl. oz.; there is an opinion that it is only 12 fl. oz.). A shopkeeper's barrel might consist of 1000 *logs*. The problem with oil was that it stuck to the walls of the storekeeper's measuring cups. With wine, the problem was the frothing and foaming so the customer did not always receive a full measure.

Work is not permitted on the festivals and taking precise measurements constitutes "work." However, on the intermediate days of the festivals of Passover and Sukkoth

some types of work are permitted (measuring precisely would not be a problem then).

It is said of Rabbi Elazar bar Tzadok and Abba Saul b. Batnit, who were shopkeepers in Jerusalem all their lives, that on the eve of a festival they would fill their measures and give it to their customers on the day of the festival [this was done because it is not permitted to measure out something on a festival]. Rabbi Chananiah b. Antigonus said that they also did this on the intermediate days of the festival in order to avoid neglect of the house of study [they were needed to answer *halachic* questions that arose; by filling up their measures during the evening, they had more time during the daytime to be in the academy.] The sages said they even did this on ordinary days so that the measuring cups emptied completely into the buyer's vessel. In fact, Abba Saul ben Batnit had collected 300 jars of oil from what clung to the vessel after it was measured, and his companion, Elazar b. Tzadok, had collected 300 jars of wine from the foam left over in the measures they used. They brought these to the treasurers dispensing charity. The treasurers said: "You are not required to do so" [customers expect the residue of oil and wine to remain with the shopkeeper and are not concerned about it since it is a trivial amount]. They replied: "But

we do not wish to keep them." The treasurers said: "Since you are determined to be stringent with yourselves, the liquids will be turned over to the community, to be used for communal purposes." It happened that Abba Saul b. Batnit became ill and the rabbis came to visit him. He said to them: "Come see my right hand that always measured honestly and despite this, it is in pain" (Tosefta Beitza 3:6; Jerusalem Talmud, Beitza 16a; based on translation of Bialik & Ravnitzky) (35).

The two shopkeepers were so strict with themselves when it came to business ethics that they did not wish to benefit from something that was technically not theirs. In order to ensure that the oil or wine in their measuring cups were emptied completely, customers brought their own vessels in the beginning of the evening. The two shopkeepers turned their measuring cups directly over on the customer's vessel and thus allowed it to drain all evening. In this way, no oil or wine would remain in their measuring cups. However, some customers came during the daytime and were in a rush and asked them to pour the oil or wine in their vessels. This would result in some wine or oil being left behind in the seller's measuring cup. This is why Elazar b. Tzadok and Abba Saul ended up with 300 jars of oil and wine.

Abba Saul used the pain in his right hand to show the rabbis that it is indeed necessary to be extremely careful when it comes to honest weights and measures. They told him that his stringency was not necessary so he wanted to show that, despite all his precautions, his right hand suffered from illness. It appears that he felt that had he been even more careful, he would not have pain in his hand. In any case, a righteous person will attribute any suffering to some misdeed and will try to better himself.

Jewish business ethics not only provides rules of behavior, but the texts reveal a vision encouraging people to incorporate the highest spiritual ideals into the business world. The Jewish tradition emphasizes the centrality of a business ethics demanding honesty and integrity in business (29).

### Conclusion

The Talmud uses many techniques to teach ethics and other valuable lessons; storytelling is one of them. These stories involved God, Biblical figures such as Abraham and Moses, Satan, animals, and nature. What mattered to the Talmudic sages was the lesson to be learned. There are many more stories in the Talmud. Those interested in reading additional stories, should read *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah* by Bialik & Ravnitzky (35). The most important

lesson to be derived from the Talmudic stories is that humankind has an obligation to take care of the weak and improve the world. This is the only way to have a meaningful existence. The mission statement of every organization should be based on Hillel's 2,000 year old maxim: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" (Babylonian Talmud, Avos1:14). The profit motive has to be balanced out with social responsibility.

The Talmudic stories are designed to teach us to hear "the silent cry of the afflicted, the lonely and marginal, the poor, the sick and the disempowered, and to respond" (36). If the Talmud only consisted of *halachah* (Jewish law), it would not have the ability to stir the heart; this is why there is so much *aggadah* (homiletics). The following story is a clever way of describing the difference between the two approaches of teaching morality.

Rabbi Avuhu and Rabbi Chiya b. Abba once came to a place. Rabbi Avuhu gave an *aggadic* [homiletics] sermon and Rabbi Chiya b. Abba gave a *halachic* sermon. Everyone left Rabbi Chiya to hear Rabbi Avuhu's lecture. Rabbi Chiya felt hurt. Rabbi Avuhu said to him: "I will give you a parable to describe what this situation is like. There were two salespeople: One was

selling precious stones and the other was selling trinkets. To whom will the public flock? Obviously, to the seller of the trinkets?" (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 40a)

It is true that more people shop at Macys than at Tiffany & Co. What the humble Rabbi Avuhu did not say was that *aggadah* not only attracts bigger crowds, it also has the ability to sway people. Nothing moves the soul more than a powerful story. Rabbi Avuhu was such a master of homiletics that he used a parable to mollify his friend.

Many of the scholars were experts in *halachah* and others in *aggadah*; some were proficient in both. This story illustrates the problems of one sage who had to teach both.

Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi sat before Rabbi Yitzchak Naphcha. One asked him to speak on *halachah* and the other asked him to speak on *aggadah*. When he started to discuss *halachah*, one did not let him continue and when he started to discuss *aggadah*, the other did not let him continue. Rabbi Yitzchak Naphcha told them: "I will give you a parable to describe what my situation is like. It is like that of the man with two wives: one young and one old". The young wife plucked out his gray hairs to make him look younger and the old wife plucked out his black hairs to make him look older. Eventually, the

man became bald. (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 60b)

Judaism has a long and rich history of reflection on issues in business ethics and business law. People must conduct themselves in an honest way. Organizations need to recognize some form of corporate social responsibility. The most impactful argument in favor of business responsibility is that society supplies the mandate for business's existence and that business must therefore react and respond to changes in society.

Jewish business ethics needs to continue to self-consciously promote models of aspirations, as well as rely on fixed legal norms.

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