

Rava as Mara de-Atra in Maḥoza

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We tend to talk in collectives: Ḥazal—*hakhameinu zikbronam li-verakhah*, “our Sages, blessed be their memory,” “the Sages”—plural, the *nevi'im*, the Tannaim, the Amoraim, the Rishonim and Aharonim, but on another level we are—or should be—aware that each one of our Sages was himself a treasure-house of Torah, and had *shittot* and *darkei limmud* of his own, some of which he had in common with other members of his yeshiva or *beit midrash*. We are also aware of the fact that our Sages’ words were spoken with great precision and express concepts and principles that are internally consistent. We all know that the Ramban has certain *shittot* that differ from those of the Rambam, for example, and this is true in areas of Halakhah, Aggadah and *hashqafah*. The Gemara already notes that that is true of the Tannaim, and, to some extent, it does the same for the Amoraim (see below). If we want to understand the Rambam *ki-peshuto*, we cannot mix the Ramban’s kabbalistic teachings with the Rambam’s Aristotelian ones, (even though some kabbalists have done so, as in *Sefer Shomer Emunim* which depicts the Rambam as a kabbalist).

In *Paḥad Yitzḥak, Hanukah, ma'amar 3*, Rav Yitzḥak Hutner ¹ wrote as follows:

מרובה היא מדת הבלטת כוחה של תורה שבעל פה המתגלה במחלוקת הדעות,
מאשר במקום הסכמת הדעות. כי הלא בהך דאלו ואלו דברי אלוקים חיים כלול הוא
היסוד כי גם השיטה הנידחת מהלכה דעת תורה היא, אם רק נאמרה לפי גדרי

¹ R. Yitzḥak Hutner, *Paḥad Yitzḥak: Quntras Ve-Zot Hanukah*, Brooklyn, 5624, p. 18.

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המשא ומתן של תורה שבעל פה. והיינו משום דתורה ניתנה על דעתם של חכמי התורה (לשונו של הרמב"ן) ואם יעמדו למנין אחר כך ויכריעו כהדעת הנידחית, מכאן ואילך תשתנה ההלכה אליבא דאמת. (יעוין אור ישראל פרק ל' בהערה²) ונמצא כי מחלוקתם של חכמי תורה מגלה את כוחה של תורה שבעל פה הרבה יותר מאשר הסכמתם. מלחמתה של תורה איננה אופן אחד בין האופנים של דברי תורה, אלא שמלחמתה של תורה היא יצירה חיובית של ערכי תורה חדשים, שאין למצא דוגמתם בדברי תורה סתם.

Our perception of the power of *Torah she-be'al Peh* as revealed through disagreements is greater than when there is agreement. For within the principle that “these and those are the Word of the Living G-d” is included the essential principle that even the *shittah* that is rejected as practical halakhah is nevertheless a Torah view, when it is expressed according to the norms of the discourse of *Torah she-be'al Peh*. This is because the Torah was given by the *da'at* of the Sages of the Torah (as enunciated by the Ramban). And if they then vote and decide according to the rejected view, the halakhah then changes in a true sense (*aliba' de-emet*). (See *Or Yisrael*, chapter 30 in a note.) The result is that in disagreement the power of *Torah she-be'al Peh* is revealed to a greater extent than by [the Sages'] agreement. The “war of Torah” (*milhamtah shel Torah*—Torah debate) is thus not merely one mode of *divrei Torah* among others, but rather “the war of Torah” is a positive creation of new Torah values, whose like is not to be found in ordinary words of Torah [where there is no disagreement].

At first glance, this seems contradictory, but it is no more contradictory than the *ma'amar* that Rav Hutner quotes: “these and those are the Words of the Living G-d”—even when they disagree. The reason is that the Torah is the model, the blueprint of the universe, with all its contradictions and contrary tendencies. Each legitimate Torah view has its own *heleq* of truth, even when, for practical purposes, we must decide in favor of another one in the here and now. And, here, as elsewhere, the *first* level of understanding is the *peshat* level, the level of “plain meaning,” which requires understanding each view in its context. And since every *memra* was uttered by a Tanna or Amora, the first level of meaning is what that *memra* meant to the one who enunciated it. Thus for example, at the beginning of Pesahim R. Huna and R. Yehudah seem to disag-

² In the index to *Paḥad Yitzḥak: Ramban al ha-Torah* to Devarim 17:11.

ree whether in that mishnah the mishnaic word *or* means “light”, or is a euphemism for “darkness.” The Gemara however concludes that there is no disagreement: R. Huna, who defined it as *nogbei* (“light”) was employing the word as it was used in Sura, where it was used as a euphemism for “darkness.” On a very basic level, understanding an individual Amora’s mode of speaking, his characteristic turns of expression, etc., is indispensable to Torah study.

In a statement repeated several times in Shas, Rava emphasizes the importance of an individual’s input in Torah study, that is, the process of *making Torah one’s own*. Let us look at AZ 19a, where this appears in the context of Rava’s ‘*musar shmuess*’ regarding Talmud Torah.

אמר רבא: לעולם ילמוד אדם תורה במקום שלבו חפץ, שנאמר: כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו.

ואמר רבא: בתחילה נקראת על שמו של הקב"ה ולבסוף נקראת על שמו, שנאמר: בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה ויליה. ואמר רבא: לעולם ילמד אדם תורה ואח"כ יהגה, שנאמר: בתורת ה', והדר ובתורתו יהגה.

Rava said: One should always study that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire, as it is said, “But whose desire is in the Torah of the Lord [Psalms 1:2].” Rava also said: At the beginning [of this verse] the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end it is called by his name, for it is said, “Whose desire is in the Torah of *the Lord* and in *his* [own] Torah does he meditate day and night” (Joshua 1:8) [That is, first it is called *Toras Hashem*, and then it is called *his* Torah—the Torah of the one who studies it].

Rava also said the following: One should always study the Torah first [i.e., memorize it] and meditate on it afterwards, as it is said: “. . . the Torah of the Lord,” and then, “and in his [own] Torah he meditates.”

In other words, our task in studying Torah, if we merit it, is to put our own *individual stamp on Hashem’s Torah by filtering it through our own understanding, as limited as that may be*. The souls of Kelal Yisrael were all at *Mattan Torah*, and we each have our own portion of Torah assigned to us. Of course, that understanding, even if part of our ‘self’ contributes to it, must reflect true Torah values and modes of thought and argument. Clearly, this individual stamp on Torah learning applies to the Amoraim; after all, Rava was first and foremost addressing his own colleagues, who were Amoraim. Thus, we should expect that each Amora has his own

individual understanding of various issues, and when they differ, seemingly isolated differences might be understood as expressions of a more general outlook.

Of course, most of the time the texts of *Torah she-be'al Peh*—the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Bavli, the Yerushalmi—provide the names of those Tannaim or Amoraim who hold a certain view, (and in doing so bring redemption to the world.) But even in those cases where these *sefarim* don't cite the name of the authority holding a particular view, Hazal go out of their way to track it down. This is particularly significant, since, at least in the case of the Mishnah, it was Rebbe who omitted the name of the Tanna in order to indicate that the Halakhah followed his view, and, as we know, the Gemara often notes that a particular mishnah does not follow the view of a particular Tanna. Thus, it is important to identify views that are not dominant—*halakhah le-maaseh!*

By ignoring the differences, the individual nature of each *de'ab* and *shittah*, we lose an important aspect of Torah. In the following essay I hope to provide a useful example of what can be learned when we follow Rava's teachings *as a unit*. In this light we can understand why the authoritative compilation of *Torah she-be'al Peh*—the Talmud Bavli—investigates the question of whose view a particular mishnah reflects no fewer than 232 times, and the Yerushalmi does the same no fewer than 72 times. Why was this important? Because each view has a reason behind it, reasons based on principles that are held by one Tanna or another, and it is important to understand not only the particular view in a mishnah, but also to understand how mishnahs are linked by consistently held principles. This is true even when that view is not the majority view. Thus, the Gemara notes that R. Meir is concerned about minority occurrences some 16 times, and refers to that opinion another four times.³ Again, the Gemara attempts to determine the opinion of various Tannaim on the matter of *bererah*, the retrospective determination of reality.⁴ When a question is asked that mixes opinions,

³ Yev 61b, 119a, Git 2b, AZ 34b, 40b (2x), Hul 6a, 11b, 86a, Bek 19b, 20a, 20b, 42b, Nid 31b, 48a (2x); see also Yeb 67b (3x) and Qid 3b.

⁴ See Git 25a, Eruv 37b, Bez 37b, BQ 69a.

the Bavli asks: *gavra agavra qa ramiṭ?*—are you throwing together opinions of different Amoraim? Such a procedure has no validity! Each Sage’s teaching is consistent in his own terms, but not necessarily when combined with another Sage’s.

At times the Gemara also traces the reasons for Amoraic opinions, as it does in the case of *asmakhta* in matters of commercial law. But, on the whole, it only began the task of providing the links between the various Amoraic statements. In the case of Rava, who is mentioned 3,800 times in the Bavli, the observation that *ve-azda Rava le-ta’ameih*—that his opinion in one place follows his *shittah* in another—appears only 13 times in Shas.⁵ In other words, the process of showing Rava’s consistency in his *memrot* was only at its start when the Bavli was closed. In this respect, as in many others, the Rishonim (and especially the Baalei Tosafot, see below) continued the task. The expression *azda R. Peloni le-ta’ameih*, is used some 60 times in all, and another 28 times if more than one Tanna or Amora is involved,⁶ but only 30 times in relation to Babylonian Amoraim: thirteen times for Rava, twelve times in relation to Shmuel,⁷ once each for Rabbah (Ket 34b) and R. Hisda (Qid 63b), twice for R. Nahman (BM 26a, Hul 25b), and, finally, once for R. Ashi (Shab 100b). Three of these observations concern Amoraim closely associated with Rava: R. Hisda, his teacher and eventual father-in-law, R. Nahman, his *rebbe muvhak*, and Samuel, who was, at least to some extent, R. Nahman’s teacher (see BM 16b). This is not surprising since these Amoraim are among the most influential in Shas. But, as we noted regarding R. Meir, the *baalei ha-Shas* are concerned about this issue even when the *man de-amar* is not necessarily of that level of prominence—it is a consistent concern. The Gemara notes the consistency of the views of Tannaim with the ex-

⁵ Ber 36b, Shab 5b, 80a, 124b, Pes 6a, 30a, 110a, Bez 8b, Hag 22a, Git 84b, BB 56a, Sanh 74b, Hul 81a.

⁶ Shab 38a, 125b, Eruv 87b, Pes 29a, 93a, RH 11b, Yom 40a, Bez 40a, Yev 62a, 72b, Ket 34b, Git 47b, Qid 80a, BQ 48a, 51b, 77b, BB 65a, Mak 91, 15b, Shev 20a, Zev 9b, Men 92a, 109a, Hul 39a, 69b, 81b, Bek 47a, Ker 6b.

⁷ Shab 116b, Eruv 49a, Pes 30a, 101a, Suk 34b, Yev 18b, 56a, Ket 100b, Git 24b, BB 42b, Hul 79a, Nid 25a.

pression *be-shittat* (22 times)⁸ or *le-shittato* (5 times).⁹ Although this is still far from systematic, enough examples of this *derekh* survive to demonstrate that the *ba'alei ha-Shas* considered this a legitimate way of understanding the words of the Tannaim and Amoraim.

Why is understanding the link between Amoraic opinions important? There are at least two reasons. Since the Torah's laws are not, *has veshalom*, arbitrary or haphazard (even if, as in the case of *huqqim*, the reason is hidden from us), understanding the link between Amoraic opinions allows us to see the reason behind their *shittot*. In most areas of Halakhah, we are encouraged to seek the reasons for every *din* because it is only by means of such study that one makes Torah one's own—it becomes part of one's being. If one does not understand something, it remains foreign—outside oneself.

Secondly, generally speaking, understanding a *memra kifeshuto*—understanding it in its immediate *context*—is a key to understanding it in its multiple contexts, including that of *pesak*. In the end, when we deal with halakhic texts, we must understand the *memra* in the broader context of Halakhah, from *Humash* and *Shas* through contemporary *Poskim*. But on the *peshat* level we seek to understand a particular *memra* in the context of the Amora's views and approaches, his *shittot*. Generally speaking, his *shittot* will be consistent not only within themselves, but also within the wider context of those of his *rebbe*s and *talmidim*, that is, his *beit midrash*. In the case of the Babylonian Amoraim, this means understanding, say, R. Huna's *memrot* in terms of the views of his *rebbe*, Rav, and his *talmidim*, Rabbah b. R. Huna and R. Hisda. In the case of Rava, it means—when possible—tracing his views back to his *rebbe*s R. Nahman and R. Hisda, to R. Nahman's *rebbe*s, Rabbah b. Avuha and Shmuel, but also seeing the view of Rava's *talmidim*, R. Papa, R. Huna b. R. Yehoshua, R. Zevid, and others.

Of course, the ultimate *pesak* is not bound to the *peshat* of any one Amora, even when we decide according to his view. A *sugya* can combine the views of one Amora with the principles of another in order to apply the halakhah in question to various situations. It is

⁸ Eruv 86b, Pes 18a (2x), 53b, R.H. 30b, Suk 16b, 41a, Bez 27a, Meg 27b, Ket 40a, Zev 30a, 93a, Men 68b, 71b (3x), 72a, 102b, 103b, Ker 18a, Me'il. 13b.

⁹ Git 9b, 10b, Hul 74b, 92b (2x).

up to the *poskei ha-dor* to determine the relevant halakhah for their time. That is why *halakhah ke-baṭra'ei*, the halakhah follows the later opinion (within the limits of Masorah, of course). But if Talmud Torah is pursued with the proper *derekh*, or, more precisely, with one or more of the proper *derakhim*, then, as Rav Hutner זצוק"ל pointed out, the result is “a positive creation of new Torah values.”

II

This concern for consistency remained with the Rishonim. A particularly instructive example, which will teach us something of the challenges that Rava himself faced in his own community, concerns Mordechai's reaction to Haman's demand that he bow down to him. According to Rava, both Mordechai and Haman were Persian officials in charge of the banqueting arrangements in Ahasueres' palace (Est 1:8, see Meg 12a). Despite his status, however, Haman became Mordechai's superior and he would have had to bow down to him, and this he refused to do. The reason for his refusal is not made clear in the Megillah. It appears from a discussion between Rava and Abaye that Haman claimed to be a god, and though no one really believed that he was one, Mordechai refused to honor him as one. However, as Tosafot pointed out, it is Rava himself who in Sanh 61b holds that one who performs an idolatrous act out of “love or fear” is *patur*. According to Rava, one transgresses the *issur* of *avodah zarah* only when one *accepts* the idol as one's god, but not when worshiping it out of fear. Abaye holds that the intention is irrelevant; what counts is the action. If so, ask Tosafot: why—according to Rava himself—did Mordechai not employ Rava's *beter* and bow down to Haman (see Tosafot Sanh 61b s.v. *Rava amar patur*)? Indeed, Rava himself notes that the Jews of Mordechai's time had complaints against Mordechai for arousing Haman's ire against them (Meg 12b-13a).

From the analysis in Sanh 61b it is apparent that Rava himself held that Haman made himself into a god (*de-ihu gufeih eloha*) but since he was worshiped out of fear, even this was not considered a violation of the prohibition of *avodah zarah* (*de-ilu Haman mi-yir'ah*). Moreover, Rava points out elsewhere that in his own time and place it was customary to provide clay braziers and bellows for

Zoroastrians (Sanh 74b) because the Halakhah takes cognizance of cases in which the idolater intends the Jew's cooperation for his own benefit, and not for the *avodah zarah* itself. Surely that was Haman's motive. We see from this that Rava's *beter* was not theoretical, but may have applied to conditions in his own time. Indeed, the Rishonim disagree on the exact circumstances under which such *beterim* may apply, and the Ran is particularly stringent on this issue.

In the end, though, Tosafot conclude that the *issur* could not be contravened even according to Rava either because (a) Haman wore idols around his neck, or because (b) it was a matter of Kiddush HaShem. Unfortunately, since this midrash does not appear in the Bavli, we cannot prove that Rava was aware of this idea. Moreover, there was another consideration that Mordechai must have had: the danger to the further existence of Kelal Yisrael if Mordechai had yielded to Haman's demands! As noted above, Rava pointed out that Kelal Yisrael criticized Mordechai for his intransigence (Meg 12b-13a). In the end, Mordechai's position required that, as a *leader* of Kelal Yisrael, he could not permit himself to make use of Rava's *beter*, as a matter of Kiddush HaShem, as Tosafot point out.

This is an enormously instructive case, not only for the reasons given, but also because Tosafot here combined Rava's views in Halakhah *and* Aggadah; each is part of Rava's Torah, and to understand Rava in one area, we must understand him in both. In the following cases, we will examine Rava's views on aggadic topics that have halakhic consequences.

This in turn sheds light on a personal decision of Rava's. In Shab 116a the Gemara reports that various Amoraim disagreed as to whether they should attend an interdenominational discussion in a Bei Abidan. While Rashi (as quoted by Tosafot in A.Z. 17a, see below) understands this phrase as referring to an idolatrous temple, Tosafot suggest that it was merely a neutral place where discussions were held on various matters (see Tosafot A.Z. 17a, s.v. *harheq me-aleha*), and presumably not a place for religious discussions—even though it is clear from the Gemara that there were *kisvei qodesh* kept there. Tosafot conclude that the Bei Abidan was not a place of *minut* (*meqom minut mammash*) but rather a place where gentile scholars would gather to debate their laws (*nose'im ve-notenim be-*

dinim). Indeed, Rav would not go, Shmuel would, and a certain Mar b. Yosef went enthusiastically, while Rava excused himself because of the difficulty of reaching that particular Bei Abidan. It is noteworthy that Tosafot seem to have had a different *girsā* in *Shabbat*, since they note that R. *Nahman* went and endangered himself. If this *girsā* is correct, it may have been the experience of his own *rebbe* that convinced Rava not to go to these debates, simply because of the dangers to which such attendance could lead. Despite all of this, however, it is noteworthy that *kitvei ha-qodesh* were kept there, indicating that there was some religious dimension to the discussions, and the fact that Rav could refuse to attend indicates that these were not medieval style “forced debates.”

Nevertheless, Rava was careful to maintain good relations with the non-Jewish communities around him, and thus did not refuse outright, but pointed to a large palm tree in the way, which, even if uprooted as the government offered to do, would leave a large hole in the road leading up to the Bei Abidan. Indeed, his excuse is plausible, since we know that his *rebbe*, R. *Nahman*, travelled in a palanquin (presumably carried by four men) (Git 31b), and Rava himself (when he became a *dayyan* of the Resh Galuṭa?) would do so as well (B.M. 73b); as convenient as a palanquin was for the passenger, a large hole in the ground would have made passage difficult and dangerous. He would send Bar Sheshakh, apparently a pagan Babylonian, gifts even on idolatrous festivals, since he was certain that Bar Sheshakh was not himself an idolater (AZ 65a). He also maintained friendly relations with Issur the *Ger*, and even once based a *pesak* on information he had gotten from him (AZ 70a). In this connection it should be noted that Maḥoza, Rava’s town, was a suburb of the Persian winter capital of Ctesiphon—it was right across the river, and as a consequence, many non-Jews lived there. Both the Jewish Resh Galuta and the Christian bishop of Ctesiphon resided in Maḥoza (called Kokhe by the Christians). We can understand then why there were many *gerim* in Maḥoza (Qid 73a), as opposed to Pumbediṭa and Maṭa Maḥasia, where R. Yehudah and R. Ashi observed that there were none (Ber 17b). The Maḥozan Jewish

community was, for better or worse, much more open to outsiders than Pumbediṭa'.¹⁰

III

While relations with the government and non-Jews were full of potential dangers and pitfalls, Rava's need to deal with dissidents in his own community was no less delicate and complicated. As the Maharsha recognized, Rava's community also contained people who were skeptical of the authenticity of *Torah she-be'al Peh* and of rabbinic authority (*amei ha-aretz*; see Maharsha on Mak 22b s.v. *kam-mah tipsba'ei*, where he points to Sanh 99b-100a), and Rava had to deal with such people as well. As the Gemara testifies, he kept them in the community by responding to their arguments when necessary, but also by employing a certain ironic humor at times (Sanh 99b-100a), and veiled threats at other times (Shab 133b). It would seem that Rava succeeded, at least in his own lifetime, but it may be significant that none of his *talmidim* stayed in Maḥoza after his *petirah*; R. Nahman b. Yitzhak reestablished Pumbediṭa as a place of learning, R. Papa moved to Naresh, and Ravina apparently went to Maṭa Maḥasiya, a suburb of Sura. It may be that none of them felt able to take up the challenge of dealing with Maḥoza's Jewish community, or as one of *Hakirah's* editors suggests, they felt unable to deal with the royal court across the river—or both.

Three texts illustrate the situation he faced, one from Mak 22b, one from Sanh 99b-100a, one from Shab 23a, and, finally, one from Eruv 21b, respectively.

אמר רבא: כמה טפשאי שאר אינשי דקיימי מקמי ספר תורה ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה, דאילו בס"ת כתיב ארבעים, ואתו רבנן בצרו חדא.

¹⁰ For details, see Yaakov Elman, "Ma'aseh be-Shtei Ayarot: Maḥoza u-Pumbediṭa Ke-Meyatzegot Shtei Tarbuyot Hilkhatiyyot," *Torah li-Shemah: Mehqarim be-Mada'ei ha-Yahadut li-khvod Prof. Shamma Yehudah Friedman*, Jerusalem: Bar Ilan UP, 2007, pp. 3-38, and "The Socioeconomics of Babylonian Heresy," *Jewish Law Association Studies* XVII (2007), pp. 80-126.

Said Rava: How foolish are most people who rise [in respect] before a Torah scroll but not before a rabbinic scholar, for in a Torah scroll is written, “forty [strokes shall you give him and not more] (Deut 25:3),” and the Rabbis came and reduced it by one! [Thus they are due as much respect as a Torah scroll, if not more, since they control its interpretation, even when it goes against the plain meaning of the text.]

אפיקורוס כגון מאן? רבא אמר: כגון הני דבי בנימין אסיא, דאמרי: מאי אהני לן רבנן? מעולם [ק ע"א] לא שרו לן עורבא, ולא אסרו לן יונה. רבא, כי הוו מייתי טריפתא דבי בנימין קמיה, כי הוה חזי בה טעמא להיתירא, אמר להו: תחזו, דקא שרינא לכו עורבא. כי הוה חזי לה טעמא לאיסורא, אמר להו: תחזו דקא אסרנא לכו יונה

What is a heretic [of whom the Mishnah states that he will have no portion in the World to Come]? ...Said Rava: [These are] like those members of the household of Benjamin the Physician, who say: What use are the Rabbis to us? They never permitted the raven [which the Torah forbids], nor have they forbidden the dove [which the Torah allows; thus the Rabbis cannot undo what is written in the Torah]. When [members] of the household of Benjamin the Physician would bring a [question regarding the permissibility for consumption of animals] with a fatal organic defect [which are ordinarily forbidden] before Rava, when he saw a reason to be lenient, he would say to them: See, I have permitted the raven for you! And when he saw a reason to be strict, he would say to them: See, I have forbidden the dove to you!

אמר רב הונא: חצר שיש לה שני פתחים - צריכה שתי נרות. (ואמר) (מסורת הש"ס: [אמר]) רבא: לא אמרן אלא משתי רוחות, אבל מרוח אחת - לא צריך. מאי טעמא? אילימא משום חשדא, חשדא דמאן? אילימא חשדא דעלמא - אפילו ברוח אחת נמי ליבעי! אי חשדא דבני מתא - אפילו משתי רוחות נמי לא ליבעי - לעולם משום חשדא דבני מתא, וזימנין דמחלפי בהאי ולא חלפי בהאי, ואמרי: כי היכי דבהאי פיתחא לא אדליק, בהך פיתחא נמי לא אדליק.

Said R. Huna: A courtyard that has two entrances must have two [Hanukah] lamps. Rava said: This applies only [to a case where the entrances face] in two [different] directions, but it is not necessary [when it faces in only] one direction.

What is the reason? If we say [that this is] because suspicion [that one of the courtyard's inhabitants had not lit a Hanukah lamp]—who [harbors this] suspicion? If we say: the suspicion of outsiders (lit., “the world”), [R. Huna's] requirement should also apply even [to a case] of [entrance(s) in one direction]! If the suspicion of the inhabitants of the neighborhood (lit., “the people of the place”),

and sometimes one may pass on one [street] and not the other, and say: Just as he did not light in this entrance, so too he did not light on [the other].

Why would people be suspicious that someone was negligent in lighting a Hanukah lamp? The mitzvah is not onerous or expensive, and it is attractive to children.

As we shall see, the reason seems to have been that there were people in Maḥoza who did not observe Hanuka on “religious” grounds; they felt that since it was not mentioned explicitly in the Torah or in Nakh (as Purim is), Ḥazal did not have the right to establish such a holiday. Perhaps also they felt that the Maccabee’s victory should not be celebrated because their dynasty ended up by bringing the Roman’s into Eretz Yisrael. In any case, they took it upon themselves to reject a mitzvah established by Ḥazal.

Rava had two answers for these “proto-Karaities.”

First, in this environment, we can well understand why Rava shows a deep sensitivity to the theory and practice of midrash, especially *midrash balakhab*. He is one of only two Amoraim to whom the principle that “a verse does not depart from its plain sense” is attributed;¹¹ he was sharply attentive to the problem of *pesukim* for which *derashot* were missing. In his work on midrash he learned from earlier Amoraim of Eretz Yisrael, some from his father-in-law-to-be, R. Ḥisda, and some of which he pioneered himself. While we have *aggadot* in the name of earlier Babylonian Amoraim, aside from scattered *derashot*, *midrash balakhab* seems not to have been of great interest in Bavel before Rava’s time, and to a lesser extent, that of R. Ḥisda, his rebbe. This interest was carried on by his *talmidim*. Among those who are associated with the many discussions of rabbinic biblical exegesis attributed to Rava in the Bavli are R. Papa, R. Mesharshiah, and R. Zevid; these discussions were continued in the next generation by R. Papa’s disciples in Naresh, eventually engen-

¹¹ Mar b. Ravina (Rabbana) of the third generation to R. Kahana in Shab 63a, and Rava in Yev 24a; the third occurrence, in Yev 11b, is anonymous.

dering those large exegetical *sugyot* so typical of the Bavli (and so rare in the Yerushalmi).¹²

Rava also addressed the issue in a more direct way. The “household”—presumably, the sons, but perhaps even the grandsons—of Benjamin the Physician charged the rabbis with being essentially powerless, since they could not permit what the Torah forbade, and vice versa. Rava, presumably on another occasion, pointed to the Rabbis’ power in limiting the forty stripes ordained by the Torah to 39. Elsewhere, Rava emphasizes the severity of violating rabbinic ordinances, even as against those of the Torah.

דרש רבא: מאי דכתיב (קהלת י"ב) ויתר מהמה בני הזהר עשות ספרים הרבה וגו'. בני! הזהר בדברי סופרים יותר מדברי תורה. שדברי תורה יש בהן עשה ולא תעשה, ודברי סופרים - כל העובר על דברי סופרים חייב מיתה. שמא תאמר אם יש בהן ממש מפני מה לא נכתבו - אמר קרא עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ. (קהלת י"ב)

Rava expounded [presumably in public]: What [is the meaning of the verse] that is written, “And of more than these, my son, take heed, the making of many books” (Koh. 12:12)? My son, take heed of the words of the Scribes more than the words of the Torah, for the words of the Torah contain positive and negative commandments, while as for the words of the Scribes, whoever transgresses the words of the Scribes is worthy of death. Perhaps you will say that if they have substance to them, why were they not written down? The verse [therefore] says: “Of the making of books there is no end” (Eccl. 12:12).

Paradoxically, though ordinarily doubts regarding rabbinic decrees are decided leniently, Rava here wished to emphasize the greater severity of the violation of those decrees even as against biblical laws. In this way he emphasized the authority of Hazal in instituting those *takkanot*. In an exchange with R. Nahman he raised the question of why the mishnah in BM 55a-b included a rabbinic decree (*demai*) along with biblical ones in listing those *mattanot keburnah* for which a fine of a fifth was demanded. The answer: to strengthen the authority of those rabbinic decrees!

¹² All of this is discussed in more detail in my “Rava ve-Darkei ha-Iyyun ha-Eretz Yisraeliyot be-Midrash ha-Halakhah,” in Y. Gafni, ed., *Merkaz u-Tefutzah: Eretz Yisrael veba-Tefutzot bi-Ymei Bayit Sheni, ha-Mishnah veba-Talmud*, Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 2004, pp. 217-242.

משנה. חמשה חומשין הן, אלו הן: האוכל תרומה, ותרומת מעשר, ותרומת מעשר של דמאי, והחלה והבכורים - מוסיף חומש. והפודה נטע רבעי ומעשר שני שלו - מוסיף חומש. הפודה את הקדשו - מוסיף חומש, הנהנה שוה פרוטה מן ההקדש - מוסיף חומש, והגזול את חבירו שוה פרוטה ונשבע לו - מוסיף חומש.

גמרא. אמר רבא: קשיא ליה לרבי אלעזר תרומת מעשר של דמאי: וכי עשו חכמים חיזוק לדבריהם כשל תורה? –

אמר רב נחמן אמר שמואל: הא מני - רבי מאיר היא, דאמר: עשו חכמים חיזוק לדבריהם כשל תורה. דתניא: המביא גט ממדינת הים, נתנו לה ולא אמר לה בפני נכתב ובפני נחתם - יוציא והולד ממזר, דברי רבי מאיר. וחכמים אומרים: אין הולד ממזר. כיצד יעשה? יטלנו ממנה, ויחזור ויתננו לה בפני שנים, ויאמר לה בפני נכתב ובפני נחתם.

ולרבי מאיר, משום דלא אמר לה בפני נכתב ובפני נחתם - יוציא והולד ממזר? אין, רבי מאיר לטעמיה, דאמר רב המנונא משמיה דעולא, אומר היה רבי מאיר: כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בגיטין - יוציא והולד ממזר.

MISHNAH. [The addition of] a fifth [to the principal] is required in five cases: [i] one who eats *terumah*, the *terumah* of *ma'aser*, the *terumah* of *ma'aser* of *demai*, *ḥallah*, and the first fruits—must add a fifth; [ii] he who redeems the fourth year planting and his own *ma'aser sheni* adds a fifth; [iii] he who redeems his *heqdesh* adds a fifth; [iv] he who benefits from *heqdesh* the value of a *perutah* adds a fifth; and [v] he who robs his neighbor of a *perutah*'s worth and swears [falsely] to him concerning it must add a fifth.

GEMARA. Rava said: The *terumah* of the tithe of *demai* presented a difficulty to R. Eleazar: Did then the Sages set up protective measures for their enactments [that is, to the same degree of severity] as for those of the Torah?—

Said R. Naḥman in Samuel's name: The author of this [Mishnah] is R. Meir, who maintained: The Sages did set up protective measures for their enactments as for those of the Torah. For it has been taught: If one brought a divorce from countries overseas and delivered it to her [the wife] without declaring, 'It was written in my presence and signed in my presence,' he [=her next husband] must divorce her [too], and their offspring is a *mamzer*; this is R. Meir's view. But the Sages say: Their offspring is not a *mamzer*. What then shall he [the messenger] do? He must take it [the divorce] back from her, give it to her again in the presence of two witnesses and declare, 'It was written in my presence and signed in my presence.'

But according to R. Meir, [merely] because he did not declare to her, 'It was written in my presence and signed in my presence,' he must divorce her, and the child is a *mamzer*! —

Yes. R. Meir is consistent with his view. For R. Hamnuna said on ‘Ulla’s authority: R. Meir used to say, Whenever one departs from the fixed procedure ordained by the Sages in case of divorce, he [her next husband] must give a divorce, whilst the offspring is a *mamzer*.

Here Rava addresses the same question, but in a halakhic mode: Do the Sages equate the punishment for violating one of their own enactments (*taqqanoṭ*) in the same way that the Torah does? Do they make a *de-rabbanan* as severe as a *de-oraita*? And the answer is yes, they do, at least according to R. Meir, who will even declare a child a *mamzer* because his mother did not fulfill all the requirements—even the *de-rabbanan* requirements—of receiving a *get*. Thus, the problem of ensuring respect for rabbinic *taqqanoṭ* was an issue that concerned both Rava and R. Nahman.

We should also note in passing that the Gemara hastens to identify the author of this Mishnah as R. Meir, and to coordinate this Mishnah’s teachings with his other *shittot*.

In Eruvin, though, he had to deal with another challenge to rabbinic *taqqanoṭ*: “if they [=the rabbinic decrees] are indeed valid (אם יש להן ממש), why are they not written down?” Once again, we hear echoes of the family of Doctor Benjamin—or their Maḥozan neighbors, other “sharp ones” of Maḥoza. Members of the non-rabbinic acculturated elite of Maḥoza were open to the intellectual currents and theological controversies of the Sasanian Empire at its hub. The question of the authenticity and authority of non-written traditions was a burning issue in the wake of the self-styled prophet Mani’s missionizing efforts for his new religion.¹³

Ideally, Rava’s audience apparently thought, law should be written down; why then is the law of the Rabbis unwritten? Rava responds to this problem by quoting Kohelet 12:12 once again: “Of the making of books there is no end,” that is, rabbinic law is too

¹³ See my discussion of this issue in “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition,” in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffe, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 165-197, esp. pp. 178-9.

voluminous to be written down. It is pertinent to recall at this point that the largest Middle Persian compilation known to us is the *Dēnkard*, a nine-volume Zoroastrian encyclopedia, which runs to about 169,000 words, and that dates from the ninth century. In contrast, the greatest compilation of Roman law, the second edition of Justinian's *Code* of 529, weighs in at about a million words and the Bavli runs to 1.8 million words. Based on the large fragment of Bavli *Hulin* from the Cairo Geniza identified by Marc Bregman and published by Shamma Friedman 15 years ago, which contained an average of 576 words per column, and assuming a Torah-scroll-sized scroll as standard, it would have taken about ten and a half scrolls of that size for 2,522 columns. But Justinian had the resources of the Roman Empire at his disposal. In Babylonia, even the government could not requisition such efforts. Even if we assume that Rava's "words of the Scribes" ran to only a third of the size of the Bavli at its close, this would have been beyond the capabilities of Babylonian scribes of the mid-fourth century. Aside from the technical problems, however, we must note that Rava's statement cannot be detached from the interreligious debates of the time. In one of these debates, the self-proclaimed "prophet" Mani claimed that his religion was superior to the state religion of Zoroastrianism since he had provided his followers with a written scripture, while the Zoroastrian bible, the Avesta, was still being transmitted orally. This argument was so persuasive that the Zoroastrian priests had to invent a new alphabet to write down the Avesta. Apparently some Jews accepted his argument and applied it to *Torah she-be'al Peh*—and Rava had to respond to them.¹⁴

Despite all this, Zoroastrians still held to the superiority of oral transmission of sacred texts. Mary Boyce, a major historian of Zoroastrianism, notes that three centuries after the Avesta was finally written down by the sixth century, oral transmission was still considered the superior mode: *zindag gōwišnīg saxwan az an ī pad nibišt mādagwardar hangērdan čimīg*—"it is reasonable to consider the liv-

¹⁴ See my "Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud," *Oral Tradition* 14/1 (1999) [published in 2000], pp. 52-99.

ing spoken word more important than the written.”¹⁵ And indeed, so did Ḥazal; R. Aharan ha-Kohen Sarjado, rosh yeshiva of the Pumbediṭa yeshiva in Baghdad, testifies that in his time, in the middle of the tenth century, the Bavli was still memorized by heart by most *talmidim* of his yeshiva.¹⁶

IV

Rava did more than preach. From many *memrot* transmitted in his name and in the name of his *talmidim*, we can see that Rava had already embarked on a systematic examination of *midrash halakhab*, an examination that stood him in good stead when confronted with the challenges of the household of Dr. Benjamin and the other “sharp-witted ones of Maḥoza.”

For example, in Ḥulin 84a Rava is challenged by one Yaakov Mina’a (Was he Yaakov the Heretic or Jacob the Christian?) to explain why the term *behemah* is sometimes taken as a collective and includes the class of wild animals (*ḥayyah*), while at others it is the reverse. Who this Yaakov Mina’a was is difficult to say at this point, but it is clear that Rava was the target of such questions, not only from within the Jewish community, as in the case of *habu merabbanan*—a certain *talmid*, who asked about the operation of a *midrash halakhab* on the doubled verb of *hashev teshivem* (“you shall certainly return them”) in Deut 22:1 (BM 31a)—or the household of Dr. Benjamin, but also from outside. Indications are that Rava had already concerned himself with such questions even before he became *Mara de-Atra* of Maḥoza; he was approached with such questions because he had gained a reputation for answering them. In ten places in the Bavli the question of the consistent application of the *middot* is raised, and in eight of them it is Rava who answers the question (Qid 9a, BQ 77b, Mak 8a, Tem 6b, Yom 63b, Ar 30b, Ned 80b, 88a). Moreover, some of his understanding of the *middot* he

¹⁵ See Mary Boyce, “Middle Persian Literature,” in B. Spuler, *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 4.2.1 (Iranistik), Literatur, Lieferung 1, Leiden/Koln: E.J. Brill, 1968, pp. 31-66; see pp. 34, 45, n. 1.

¹⁶ See *Otzar ha-Geonim*, Yevamot, no. 107, and the discussion in my “Orality and the Redaction” n. 12 above) pp. 72-76.

learned from R. H̄isda. Thus, the analysis of *gezerah shavahs* in terms of *don mineih u-mineih* or *don mineih ve-uqe' be-atra* is applied by R. H̄isda and R. Hamnuna (Men 62a), Rava, R. Papa, Rava's *talmid muvhaq* (Nid 43b) R. Papa and Ravina (Men 2a), and R. Papa's *talmidim* (Shev 31a, Zev 91b, and Neb 107a). Another line of research pioneered by Rava and his *talmidim* (especially R. Papa) is whether combinations of *limmudim* are possible: for example, can a *qal va-homer* be applied to a *din* that had already been derived by a *heqesh*? (Zev 41a, 49b) Or by another *heqesh*? (Zev 41a), and so on through many combinations of that sort.

Perhaps Rava's most important contribution to the study of *midrash halakhah* was his insistence that every letter or word must be interpreted. This principle was implicit long before Rava, of course, but he went one step further: he pointed out cases in which there were "missing *derashot*" (see BQ 54a, BM 27a, Men 10a). We will look at the second case:

אמר רבא: למה לי דכתב רחמנא שור חמור שה ושמלה? צריכי, דאי כתב רחמנא שמלה, הוה אמינא: הני מילי - בעדים דגופה וסימנין דגופה, אבל חמור בעדים דאוכף וסימנין דאוכף - אימא לא מהדרינן ליה, כתב רחמנא חמור, דאפילו חמור בסימני האוכף. שור ושה דכתב רחמנא למה לי? שור - דאפילו לגיזת זנבו, ושה - לגיזותיו. ולכתוב רחמנא שור, דאפילו לגיזת זנבו, וכל שכן שה לגיזותיו! אלא אמר רבא: חמור דבור לרבי יהודה, ושה דאבידה לדברי הכל קשיא.

Said Rava: Why does the All-Merciful mention "an ox, a donkey, a sheep and a garment" [in Deut 22:1, 3: "You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep go astray and hide yourself from them; you shall surely return them to your brother....So shall you do with his donkey, and so shall you do with his garments"]?

After deriving various *dinim* from each of these terms, Rava notes that the word "donkey" in Exod 21:33 is problematical, as is the word "sheep" in Deut 22:1, 3, since there is a missing *derashah* for each.

But, says Rava, [the word] "donkey" that is [mentioned] in connection with a pit ["And if a man should open a pit...and an ox or a donkey should fall in....."] [is difficult] on R. Yehudah's view, and [the word] "sheep" that is [mentioned] in connection with a lost article [in Deut 22:1. 3] on all views is difficult [since we do not have R. Yehudah's *derashah* for donkey in Exod 21:33, nor any *derashah* for "sheep" in Deut 22:1.3].

R. Yehudah rejects the Sages' *mi'ut* of *hamor ve-lo' kelim*, that the word “donkey” comes to exclude vessels that are broken, but we have no substitute *derashah* in his name, so the word still poses a problem to his view. Similarly, we have no *derashah* for “sheep” in the Deut passage. In other words, Rava is telling us that, ideally, we should have a *derashah* for every seemingly “excess” word in the Torah. Now, with the passing of the *tequfah* of the Tannaim it was no longer possible to *darshan* a *vav ha-ḥibbur*, as R. Akiva and other Tannaim had done, and so that ideal could no longer be achieved. But we should be aware of that ideal.

Indeed, it is clear from Yev 72b that R. Yoḥanan in the second generation of Amoraim already realized this. Thus, in an exchange with R. Eleazar b. Pedat, his *talmid haver*, he criticized the latter because he thought (wrongly) that R. Eleazar had expounded a *vav-beh*; Resh Lakish however pointed out that the *derashah* was actually already in Sifra, the Midrash on Leviticus.

כי הא דיתיב רבי יוחנן וקדריש: נותר בזמנו - אינו נשרף אלא ביום, שלא בזמנו - נשרף בין ביום בין בלילה, ואיתיביה רבי אלעזר לרבי יוחנן: אין לי אלא נימול לשמיני שאין נימול אלא ביום, מנין לרבות לתשעה, לעשרה, לאחד עשר, לשנים עשר (מנין)? תלמוד לומר: וביום, ואפילו למאן דלא דריש וא"ו, וא"ו וה"י דריש; אישתיק. בתר דנפק, א"ל רבי יוחנן לר"ל: ראיתי לכן פדת שיושב ודורש כמשה מפי הגבורה, א"ל ר"ל: דידיה היא? מתניתא היא. היכא תנא ליה? בתורת כהנים. נפק תנייה בתלתא יומי, וסברה בתלתא ירחי

R. Yohanan was sitting and expounding; *Noṭar* at its proper time [on the third day, as per Lev 7:17] must be burned in the daytime [since the word “day” was used]; if not at its proper time [after the third day], it may be burned either by night or by day.

R. Eleazar [b. Pedat] raised an objection: I know only that the child who must be circumcised on the eighth day must be circumcised during the day, how do I know it for the ninth, tenth, eleventh or twelfth [day after its birth]? Because it was stated: “And in the day” (*uva-yom*—Lev 12:3), and even [R. Eleazar b. R. Shimon], who does not expound a *vav* [alone] will expound a *vav-beh*! [R. Yohanan] remained silent.

After [R. Eleazar b. Pedat] went out, R. Yoḥanan said to Resh Lakish “Did you see Ben Pedat sitting and expounding like Moshe [Rabbenu] from the mouth of the Most High (*mi-pi Ha-Gevurah*)!” [Rashi: In the language of the Tannaim, {even though} R. Eleazar b. Pedat was not a Tanna; he was an Amora, the *talmid* of R. Yoḥanan.]

Resh Lakish replied: “Was it his? It is really a *baraita*.

“Where was it taught?”

“In Torat Kohanim.”

R. Yoḥanan went out and memorized it in three days and *darshend* it for three months.

Clearly, R. Yoḥanan felt that only a Tanna could expound a *derashah* on a *vav*, and criticized R. Eleazar for doing so, unaware that he was quoting a *baraita*. The *derashah* is in fact in the text of our Sifra [Tazri’a, *perek* 1, *parashah* 1]. Moreover, we do not find an Amora in all of the Bavli expounding a *vav* after the time of Rav and Shmuel, who as members of the transition generation between the tannaitic era and that of the Amoraim were in a special category (*Rav Tanna hu’ u-palig*, Ket 8a, Git 38b, BB 42a, Sanh 83b).¹⁷ The system of *midrash halakbah* was already closing down, though we find that Rava could still expound *mi’utim* and make use of some other *middot*. Apparently, in the two cases he mentions in BM 27a he did not have a tradition to account for the missing *derashot*.

V

As *Mara de-Atra* of Maḥoza and spokesman for its community, Rava had to address another issue that had much broader resonance among Jews and non-Jews alike, the problem of theodicy, *tzaddik ve-ra lo*. Once again, I will choose only three examples out of many that provide us with a view of Rava’s thoughts on this complex, difficult and fraught question. The three will be Ḥul 7b, Sot 21a, and MQ 28a.

The first of these passages is made up of three *memrot* on *yissurim* and *kapparab*, two from Eretz Yisrael, and the final one by Rava.

ואמר ר' חנינא: אין אדם נוקף אצבעו מלמטה אלא א"כ מכריזין עליו מלמעלה,
שנאמר: (תהלים ל"ז) מה' מצעדי גבר כוננו, (משלי כ') ואדם מה יבין דרכו. א"ר
אלעזר: דם ניקוף מרצה כדם עולה. אמר רבא: בגודל ימין ובניקוף שני, והוא
דקאזיל לדבר מצוה.

¹⁷ It is true that Tosafot note in their comments in Pes 92a, s.v. *ve-amar R. Yoḥanan*, that R. Yoḥanan has the same status, but he himself apparently did not think that the Torah could be expounded in this way any longer.

1. Again, R. Ḥanina said: No one bruises his finger (or: leg) below unless it was so decreed against him from Above [There follow pesukim from Ps 37:23 and Prov 20:24].
2. R. Eleazar [b. Pedat] said: The blood of a bruise atones as [does] the blood of a burnt-offering.
3. Rava added: Only the blood of a second bruising of the right thumb, and only if it happened to one who was about to perform a mitzvah.

Rava here seems to limit providential, atoning suffering to those who are injured while engaged in performing a mitzvah, and in only strictly limited circumstances. If Rava's comment relates only to no. 2, other bruising must be attributed to causes other than the need for atonement, perhaps "sufferings of love," *yissurim shel ahavah*; if it relates to no. 1 as well, he denies even providential status to most bruises. In short, he detaches suffering and atonement. What purpose then do these sufferings serve if they do not atone?

The next passage is another case in which Rava reacts to earlier opinions, limiting them also in the same way he did in Ḥul 7b. The question in Sot 21a is to what extent the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot protect the one engaged in them from temptation, sin or punishment.

The *sugya* begins with the view of R. Menahem b. R. Yose that performance of mitzvot protects one only temporarily, while the study of Torah protects one permanently. It continues with the view of R. Yosef that a mitzvah protects the one engaged in it only while he is actively involved with it, while the study of Torah does so at all times. In part this is a slightly more concrete formulation of the previous statement, but R. Yosef introduces another distinction. Torah study not only protects the scholar from suffering, but also "rescues" him from the evil inclination. Thus, the essential premise of this *sugya* implicitly rejects R. Yaakov's statement in Qid 39b, which is introduced by Rava, that "there is no reward for mitzvot in this world."

Modifying R. Yosef's formulation, Rava points to the cases of Doeg and Ahitophel, the classic instances of scholars who came to a bad end; he proposes that:

אלא אמר רבא: תורה, בעידנא דעסיק בה - מגנא ומצלא, בעידנא דלא עסיק בה -
אגוני מגנא, אצולי לא מצלא; מצוה, בין בעידנא דעסיק בה, בין בעידנא דלא עסיק
בה - אגוני מגנא, אצולי לא מצלא.

Torah protects [one from misfortune] and rescues [one from the evil inclination] when one is occupied in its study; when one is not occupied with it, it protects but does not rescue. Mitzvoṭ protect one [from misfortune] whether he is actively occupied with them or not, but they certainly do not rescue him [from the evil inclination].

Rava argues from historical experience: two great scholars came to bad ends: Aḥitophel committed suicide, and Doeg died at age 37, having lost his *heleq la-olam ha-ba'*. In Qid 39a, R. Yaakov's statement about there not being any reward for mitzvoṭ in this world is also an argument from experience, based on the incident of the son who climbed a ladder to perform the two mitzvoṭ that bring the doer long life—*kibbud av* and *shilu'ah ha-qen*—and fell to his death.

Our final source finds Rava also arguing from experience, the lives of two of the *gedolei ha-dor* of the generation before his: Rabbah and R. Ḥisda, the latter his own (second) father-in-law. Rava attributes to the workings of fate—*mazzal*—the three elements that we may see as components of individual contentment: “[length of] life, [surviving] children, and sustenance (MQ 28a).” Rava asserts that these three aspects of human life are astrologically determined and are not dependent on religious merit; he proves this by contrasting the lives of two great—“righteous”—authorities of the previous generation, Rabbah, the head of the Pumbediṭa school, and his own father-in-law, R. Ḥisda.

Rava presents in graphic terms the presence or absence of each of these components in the lives of these sages. Rabbah lived to the age of only forty; R. Ḥisda lived to the ripe old age of 92. Rabbah experienced “sixty” [i.e., a large number of] bereavements; R. Ḥisda celebrated sixty happy occasions. And finally, R. Ḥisda was so wealthy that he could afford to feed wheat bread even to the dogs of his household, while even the human members of Rabbah's household had to be content with the inferior barley bread—and did not have enough of that.

אמר רבא: חיי בני ומזונני, לא בזכותא תליא מילתא, אלא במזלא תליא מילתא. דהא רבה ורב חסדא תרווייהו רבנן צדיקי הוו, מר מצלי ואתי מיטרא, ומר מצלי ואתי מיטרא. רב חסדא היה תשעין ותרתין שנין - רבה היה ארבעין, בי רב חסדא - שיתין הלולי, בי רבה - שיתין תיכלי. בי רב חסדא - סמידא לכלבי ולא מתבעי, בי רבה - נהמא דשערי לאינשי, ולא משתכח.

ואמר רבא: הני תלת מיילי בעאי קמי שמיא, תרתי יהבו לי, חדא לא יהבו לי;
חוכמתיה דרב הונא ועותריה דרב חסדא - ויהבו לי, ענותותיה דרבה בר רב הונא -
לא יהבו לי.

Rava said: [Length of] life, children, and sustenance depend not on merit but [rather on] *mazzal*.

For take Rabbah and R. Hisda. Both were absolutely righteous rabbis; [the proof of this righteousness is that] each master prayed for rain and it came.

[Despite this,] R. Hisda lived to the age of 92; Rabbah lived only to the age of 40. In R. Hisda's house—60 marriage feasts, in Rabbah's—60 bereavements. At R. Hisda's house there was purest wheat bread for dogs, and it went to waste;¹⁸ at Rabbah's house there was barley bread for humans—and that could not be found.

This too Rava said: I requested these three things of Heaven; two were given me, but the third was not: the scholarship of R. Huna and the wealth of R. Hisda were given me, but the modesty of Rabbah b. R. Huna was not given me.¹⁹

By attributing these three essential elements of human existence to *mazzal* and not merit, Rava articulates a vision of human life that is unflinching, unsparing—and perhaps terrifying—but honest. There is no comfort or security in his doctrine, except that it reflects the reality that many people either experience or observe. Piety, prayer, learning, good deeds—all these staples of the moral life—will not provide the doer with the elements of a classical “good life,” what Ashkenazic Jews call *nachas*. An absolutely righteous rabbi (a *tzaddiq gamur*)—Rabbah in this case—could live a life that

¹⁸ Whether R. Hisda himself countenanced this is doubtful; see Shab 140b: Said R. Hisda: Whoever can to eat barley bread and eats wheat bread [instead] violates the prohibition of “You shall not destroy.” Again, R. Hisda himself attributed his wealth to more pragmatic causes—his decision to become a beer brewer; see Pes 113a. What his view of astrology was is not clear, though he was greatly concerned with the interpretation of dreams, and several of his observations on that matter are preserved; see Ber 55a, and, in a legal context, Shab 11a=Taan 12b.

¹⁹ R. Huna, Rav's *talmid muvhaq*, was the undisputed Gedol ha-Dor, while his son Rabbah, though inheriting his father's position in Sura, was not considered on a par with R. Naḥman in Maḥoza or Rabbah in Pumbediṭa, and yet he remained totally without resentment.

was short, difficult—and tragic. After twenty or twenty-five adult years of penury, of repeated tragedies and bereavements, but great scholarly and religious achievement, Rabbah dies at age 40—and this despite reaching the heights of rabbinic scholarship. According to another Gemara, his end was of a piece with his life: he died in flight from the Persian authorities, one of the inhabitants of Pumbediṭa having slandered him (BM 86a). Indeed, his unpopularity with the townspeople was well known to his disciples and he himself was well aware of it (see Shab 153a). We should note that the Bavli in Taan 25a R. Eleazar b. Pedat, on complaining to Hashem regarding his abject poverty was told: Eleazar, my son, should I turn the whole world to its beginnings, and *perhaps* then you will be born in an hour of sustenance? Upon hearing this, R. Eleazar gave up his objections!

This is not Rava’s sole contribution to the matter, however, as we have already seen. Rava reshapes R. Yosef’s statement in Sot 21a as to the limited utility of Torah study and the performance of mitzvot; he asserts (in Ber 5a) that in some cases one’s merit may bring upon him yet more suffering, albeit “sufferings of love.” As if all this were not enough, he reflects on the perilous nature of Israel’s life in exile as played out in his own life (Ḥag 5a-b). All of these (the limited protection from the exigencies of human existence afforded by Torah study and the performance of mitzvot, humanity’s own frail nature, and the “sufferings of love”) contribute to the tragic dimensions of the human condition.

In the end, however, Rava’s view of the astrological influences on the basics of human happiness was not universally accepted by the Bavli, which elsewhere rejected astrological influence as affecting Jews (see Shab 156a-b). The only exception is R. Hanina, who lived about a century before Rava, in Eretz Yisrael. But Rava’s view is likewise a minority one. It is worth noting that he bases it on experience, which we may call a *sevara*, and—as the Gemara often tells us by equating *qera* and *sevara*, or even declaring a *pasuk* as unnecessary when we have a *sevara*²⁰—a *sevara* is equivalent to a *de-oraiṭa*, a

²⁰ See Pes 21b, Yev 35b, Ket 22a, BQ 46b, Sanh 30a {twice}, Shev 22a, AZ 34b, Zev 2a, 7a, Men 2a, 13b, 73b, Ḥul 114b, Nid 25a.

Torah teaching. Thus we see what stands behind Rava's views in Qid 39b, Hūl 7b, and Sot 21a.

We may wonder how effective such a view of the limitations of Divine Providence was in addressing this issue of *tzaddiq ve-ra lo*, and what Rava's intentions were in presenting such a picture. The proverb that Rava quotes regarding "length of life, children, and sustenance," which appears often in Middle Persian and Arabic literature, indicates that this was a common view—as uncomfortable an observation of the human condition as it was. It seems that Rava understood his community: they preferred a realistic assessment of life in order to cope with its hardships and difficulties rather than a simplistic, rose-colored one. However, the Rishonim and Aḥaronim recognized that such a view, which either puts limits on Hashem's Providence or His justice, could not be interpreted in its plain sense.²¹

But as we have seen, the Bavli does not speak with one voice. Along with the rule that *ein somekbin al ha-nes*—"we do not rely on miracles" (see Pes 50b for the Aramaic version) we also have Naḥum Ish Gamzu's view that *gam zo le-tovah*—"all is for the best" (Taan 21a). Kelal Yisrael's experience has perhaps inclined it to the latter rather than the former.

In the foregoing we have emphasized the unity of Rava's halakhic and theological thought; it is more difficult to point to such a melding here, in Aggadah, the realm of the Providential ordering of the world. But Rava's profound and nuanced view of the world may be discerned in the following passage from BM 36b.

אתמר, פשע בה ויצאת לאגם, ומתה כדרכה. אביי משמיה דרבה אמר: חייב, רבא
משמיה דרבה אמר: פטור. אביי משמיה דרבה אמר: חייב, כל דיינא דלא דאין כי
האי דינא לאו דיינא הוא.
לא מבעיא למאן דאמר תחילתו בפשיעה וסופו באונס חייב - דחייב. אלא אפילו
למאן דאמר פטור - הכא חייב. מאי טעמא - דאמרין: הבלא דאגמא קטלה. רבא
משמיה דרבה אמר: פטור, כל דיינא דלא דאין כי האי דינא לאו דיינא הוא.
לא מבעיא למאן דאמר: תחילתו בפשיעה וסופו באונס פטור - דפטור. אלא אפילו
למאן דאמר חייב - הכא פטור. מאי טעמא - דאמרין: מלאך המות, מה לי הכא ומה

²¹ See my "The Contribution of Rabbinic Thought Towards a Theology of Suffering," in S. Carmy, ed., *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1999, pp. 155-212.

לי התם? ומודי אביי דאי הדרא לבי מרה ומתה דפטור. מאי טעמא - דהא הדרא לה, וליכא למימר הבלא דאגמא קטלה. ומודי רבא כל היכא דאיגנבה גנב באגם ומתה כדרכה בי גנב דחייב. מאי טעמא, דאי שבקה מלאך המות - בביתה דגנבא הוה קיימא... ..

It has been stated: If he [the *shomer*] was negligent about it, and it went out into a meadow and died naturally, Abaye in Rabbah's name ruled that he is liable, [while] Rava in Rabbah's name ruled that he is not liable.

Abaye in Rabbah's name ruled that he is liable, [and] any judge who does not give such a verdict is not a judge: not only is he liable on the view that, if the beginning is through negligence, and the end through an accident, one is liable; but even on the view that one is not liable, in this case he is. Why? Because we say: The air of the meadow land killed it.

Rava in Rabbah's name ruled that he is not liable, [and] any judge who does not give such a verdict is not a judge: not only is he not liable on the view that, if the beginning is through negligence, and the end through an accident, one is not liable; but even on the view that he is liable, in this case he is not. Why? *Because we say: What difference does one place or another make to the Angel of Death?*

Now, Abaye admits that if it returned to its owner [that is, the bailee] and then died, he is free. Why? [It is] because it had returned, and it could not be said that the air of the meadow killed it, while Rava admits that if it was stolen from the meadow and died naturally in the thief's house, he [=the *shomer*] is responsible. Why? [Even] had the Angel of Death left it alone, it still would have been in the thief's house...

While the discussion continues, we already see from the opening declarations that Rava holds that since many animals pasture in the meadow and do not die, even the negligence of the *shomer* in allowing the animal to go out to the meadow is not sufficient to make him liable, since the animal might have died even in the *shomer's* house (or barn). In this case, it was the owner's *mazzal* that caused the animal to die, and not the *shomer's* negligence, in accordance with Rava's dictum in MQ 28a regarding *mazzal* and sustenance (*mezonei*). As we know from BQ 2b, animals themselves have no *mazzal*, and so it must have been the owner's *mazzal* and not the animal's. Thus, once again, Rava's view is consistent in his aggadic and halakhic positions—as we might well expect.

Rava was at once *Mara de-Atra*, Rosh Yeshiva and Dayyan, and the Gemara gives ample evidence of his fulfilling all three roles; we have examined only his activities as *Mara de-Atra*. This summary is based on studies published over a period of more than 20 years, and much, much more can be said. For the time being, this must suffice. ❧