The Adventures of Rabbah bar bar Hannah as a Polemic Against Babylonian Jewry

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Introduction

In the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Batra* 73a[1]) there is a legal discussion pertaining to the buying and selling of ships. Amidst this deliberation, the Talmud veers off course, as it is wont to do, and introduces the reader to the legendary travel stories[2] of Rabbah bar bar Hannah, heretofore referred to as RBBH.[3] It is because of these stories that RBBH is often referred to as the "Jewish Sinbad the Sailor". These tales tell of monstrous beasts and colossal sea creatures, as well as encounters with some of the ancient Biblical locations and personalities of the Israelite desert experience. Because of their wild and outlandish nature, these tales have attracted a great deal of interest, both from traditional Rabbinic commentators as well as modern scholars. Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to grasp the meaning and significance of these stories. The ideas put forth by the scholars of the ages, although intriguing and quite fascinating, are certainly not without their deficiencies. This essay represents an attempt to propose novel interpretations of these anecdotes. It will propose that these legends must be understood in the broader context of the life of RBBH.[4] As a person who was originally born in Babylonia who subsequently moved to Israel, as well as one who later in life decided to take up the task of transmitting rabbinc teachings from

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[1] Any Talmudic references from this point and on refer to the Babylonian Talmud unless otherwise specified.

[2] In the Talmud, "travel stories" appear in a number of different contexts with varying significance. The different types of Talmudic stories, their function as well as their relevance, are enumerated and elaborated upon in Tziona Grossmark's essay entitled: *Talmudic Itineraria and Talmudic Pilgrimage: Tracing the Genre in the Babylonian Talmud.*

[3] The sugya in its broader context cites stories about some other Amoraim, but the current study will focus on RBBH.

[4] There is much academic scholarship devoted to the issue as to whether or not the biographical stories of the Talmud are to be taken as literal historical accounts or merely as literary compositions. Either way, whether the RBBH we are presented with in the Talmud is a historical figure or a literary character, utilizing the image that emerges from the various stories about him is necessary to understand these legends. For a broader discussion as to the historicity of the stories of the Talmud, there are a number of excellent books by the renowned Talmudic scholar Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. See *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud,* as well as *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud,* and finally *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition,and Culture.*

Israel to Babylonia and back, RBBH eventually developed a distaste for his brethren dwelling outside of the Holy Land. This essay will argue that these adventures are meant to be understood within this greater context, namely that they serve as RBBH's polemic against Babylonian Jewry.

Summary of Previous Scholarship

As noted earlier, many great minds have devoted themselves to unearthing the mysteries of the adventures of RBBH. What follows is a summary and critical analysis of a number of different approaches to these stories, both traditional and modern.

When it comes to the subject of aggadah, the non-legal portions of the Talmud, there is a great deal of discussion amongst traditional commentators as to the degree of seriousness and literalness that should be attributed to them.[5] However, when it comes to the tales of RBBH, the vast majority of traditional commentaries understand them in a non-literal fashion.[6]

Rabbi Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbilli (Ritba), in his commentary on this sugya, writes the following:[7]

"The stories in this chapter deal with subjects that are strange to people because they are unfamiliar with them, but they are very plausible to those with a knowledge of nature, such

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[5] A thorough summary of this discussion is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, the approach of understanding aggadah allegorically is firmly rooted in the works and thought of the Geonim and Rishonim. See Lewin's *Otsar Ha'geonim Hagigah* 5 and *Otsar Hageonim Pesahim* 170. See also Rambam's comments in the Guide For The Perplexed (3:43), as well as the novellae of Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet on Berakhot (6a). It is only later in history that we find a shift in Rabbinic thought towards literalism regarding aggadah, such as in the works of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Maharal) and Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha).

[6] Standing out as the black sheep of this sugya are Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam), and Maharsha, who do in fact argue that a number of these stories are meant to be understood literally. An analysis of their respective positions is beyond the purview of this essay and is a fascinating issue for further research.

[7] This translation is taken from Glueck, p. 38.

as the size of sea monsters and the size of waves in a storm. They also contain allusions to matters which were not seen with the eye but in a vision. For when the sages went on ocean voyages they saw there God's wonders … and during their sleep they experienced remarkable visions in the context of their meditations. The *geonim* wrote that wherever the words 'I myself saw' occur, it was in a dream while on a voyage."

Ritba cites a tradition from the Geonim that many of the tales of this sugya occurred in visions. In the spirit of this tradition, many traditional commentators have understood these tales as allegorical. Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (Gra)[8] understood that the sea represents the material world, the boat, the human body, and those who descend upon the sea as people who on the one hand possess divine souls yet on the other hand must traverse and navigate the murky waters of the physical world.[9] The waves that constantly seek to destroy the vessel represent the evil inclination, whose sole mission is to cause man to stumble upon the path of sin. The Arab merchant also signifies the evil inclination, who seeks to distract man from his study of Torah by showing him the marvels of this world. With this symbolism, Gra understands these stories as directed towards Torah scholars, warning them of the specific pitfalls and challenges that they will need to overcome while pursuing their studies. They must avoid jealousy, haughtiness and anger to be successful in their studies. If they want to become great, then they will need to accustom themselves to studying intensely despite poverty.

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[8] In his commentary, he notes the parallelism between Tehillim 107 and this sugya, and uses the verses in Tehillim to inform his interpretation of these tales. This is a fascinating observation that I have not seen discussed elsewhere in the scholarly literature. There is much room here for further research.

[9] Gra also utilizes these themes and motifs in his commentary on Jonah, which he also understands to be allegorical. The motivation for his approach to Jonah extends beyond the bounds of this essay and serves as a rich topic for further research.

While these comments certainly serve as a sharp and welcome rebuke to any student of Torah, they are difficult to read back into the text of the Talmud and ignore the larger context of the sugya. Such interpretations say more about their author than they do about the text under question. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook also understands these stories allegorically. For Rabbi Kook, the sea represents esoteric wisdom and those who descend upon the sea are those who engage with these abstruse matters. The land signifies exoteric knowledge and the Arab merchant typifies the wisdom necessary to navigate this world. According to Rabbi Kook, these stories highlight the tension between the individual and the community, the farmer and the merchant, the sensual and the other-wordly. They also touch on the existential issues of repentance, redemption, freedom and enlightenment. As with Gra, many of these interpretations, while fascinating and enlightening, do not do full justice to the sugya, and bespeak more about the worldview of Rabbi Kook than the actual text itself.[10] Many other traditional commentaries on this sugya abound.[11] However, they suffer from the same deficiencies of the other rabbinic approaches.

One common thread amongst modern academic scholarship is that these tales co-opted existing cultural imagery and icons of the time and utilized them for a particular

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[10] An excellent example of this phenomenon is with regards to the literary significance of the Arab merchant. Rabbi Kook was a man who identified with and was deeply concerned with the nationalistic elements of Judaism. His thought places great significance on the political and worldly elements of Jewish peoplehood, and quite often on the universal responsibilities that the Jewish people have to mankind as a whole. It is therefore no surprise that the Arab merchant, the character who is intimately familiar with the ways of the world, is understood by Rabbi Kook as signifying a man of wisdom. Conversely, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, a man who was almost exclusively engrossed in the proverbial "4 cubits of halacha", viewed the Arab merchant as a distraction, as typifying the allures of the outside world from which a Torah scholar must shield himself from.

[11] See for example Maharsha on this sugya who finds parallels to Jewish history in these stories. He suggests that a number of these tales allude to the four kingdoms that ruled over the Jewish people, the rise and fall of the two Jewish Commonwealths, and the scattering of the Jews throughout the land. Even though he interprets some of these stories as allegorically referring to the above ideas, he nevertheless writes a couple of times that a number of these tales are to be taken literally, as mentioned previously. The tension between literalism and allegory in his commentary on this sugya is a topic for further research and exploration.

ideological agenda.[12] For example, one of the stories describes how RBBH witnessed a giant frog being swallowed by a massive snake, which was in turn consumed by a monstrous bird, which then went and rested on a mighty tree. RBBH is described as being amazed at the strength of this tree. Reuven Kipperwasser suggests that these three beasts are drawn directly from Zoroastrian mythology, and that the tree corresponds to the renown "cosmic tree" that appears in the Epic of Gilgamesh and in Persian mythology. Kipperwasser thereby suggests that RBBH's message was one of the victory of order, signifying the true religion, Judaism, over primordial chaos, the foreign cultures and beliefs of the time.[13] As an additional example, Gunter Stemberger suggests that many of these stories are to be understood as a Rabbinic polemic against Second Temple apocalyptic literature.[14] [15]

While there is much to be gained from looking at aggadah as commenting on or perhaps responding to the general *zeitgeist* of the period, there are nevertheless many other factors that must be considered in order to truly appreciate and comprehend the depth and profundity of aggadah. Analyzing the localized context of the sugya, noticing patterns within the flow and structure of the sugya, pursuing themes, motifs and imagery within the sugya, are all essential components to the study of aggadah.[16] Beyond this, it is quite often necessary to understand the biography of an Amora in order to appreciate his statements of aggadah. Who he was, where he lived, what he experienced, what his challenges and

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[12] Frim, p. 2
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid, p. 4
[15] There is a great deal of scholarly literature that shows how many passages of aggadah are to be understood as borrowing common cultural icons and motifs for the sake of rabbinic polemic against the common culture of the time. And there is certainly a large amount of it that focuses on stories of Rabbah bar bar Hannah in particular. See for example Reuven Kipperwasser's "Rabbah bar bar Ḥa nnā's Voyages." *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 22 (2008): 215-241.
[16] As an aside, it has been pointed out to me by mentor, Rabbi Dr. Ari Bergmann, that it is because of these ideas that the rabbinc work known as *Ein Yakov,* a 16th century compilation of the solely aggadic portions of the Talmud, cannot possibly transmit the full depth and profundity of aggadah to its reader, as the broader context and textual clues of the larger sugya are missing.

hardships were, all play a role into the messages and values that he wished to transmit using aggadah. This point is supported by a passage from one of the responsa of Rambam: "We do not challenge *haggadah*[17]. Are these matters of tradition or logic? Rather each one looked [into the matter] and said what appeared to him [to be correct]."[18] Rambam is of the opinion that aggadah represents the subjective understanding and approach of a particular individual. In the realm of aggadah, are no objective and unequivocal statements of fact, rather individualistic and subjective meditations. Accordingly, understanding who the author was and what his life experiences were are essential to understanding the formation of his aggadah. What follows is a biographical description of RBBH, the culture in which he lived, and the complexities he had to navigate as a member of two distinct and often hostile communities. Following this, there will be a discussion as to the contextual clues within the sugya in Bava Batra that point to the relevance of this information to understanding a number of the stories that appear there.

Biographical Information of Rabbah bar bar Hannah

RBBH[19] (second half of the third century CE[20]) was an amora who was born in Babylonia and who eventually made his way to the land of Israel to study in the academy of Rabbi Yochanan. His intention was to settle in Israel.[21] After many years of tutelage under Rabbi Yochanan, RBBH then proceeded to travel back and forth between Israel and various

[17] For the sake of this essay, the terms "haggadah" and "aggadah" are presumed to be synonymous. For a rigorous treatment and analysis of a proposed distinction between them, see "Aggadah Versus Haggadah: Towards a More Precise Understanding of the Distinction" by Berachyahu Lifshitz.
[18] Maimonides, *Teshuvot Harambam* (Blau) II:769 (458)
[19] There is discussion as to whether or not RBBH is the son of the amora known as Rabbah bar Hannah. See the entry about RBBH in Aaron Hyman's *Toldot Tannaim v'Amoraim.*
[20] *Encyclopedia Judaica.*
[21] Pesachim 51a

communities in Babylonia[22] to disseminate the teachings of his master.[23] He also spread the teachings of other scholars of the land of Israel, such as Rabbi Joshua ben Levi[24], Rabbi Elazar[25] and Reish Lakish[26]. Upon returning to Israel, he would bring back the teachings of the amoraim of Babylonia.[27] Because of his role as a disseminator of teachings, he became known as one of the *nehutai*, one of those individuals who traveled back and forth between the academies of Israel and Babylonia and transmitted teachings between them. It is clear from the Talmud that even within Babylonia he traveled to a great many places and truly experienced a great diversity of communities.[28] Through these journeys RBBH gained much practical worldly knowledge. It is recorded of him that he could approximate the distances between locations[29] as well as approximate how far a person can travel in a day's journey.[30] He was intimately familiar with the habits, practices and cultures of the Arabs, as well as the prominent role they played in guiding caravans across the expanses and emptiness of the deserts.[31] Aside from worldly knowledge, RBBH's practical understanding of the workings of nature allowed him to present new questions to the study hall that would have otherwise not been thought of.[32] We also find examples of RBBH using his practical knowledge to aid in the process of legal decision making.[33] It is stated[34] of RBBH that in his old age his eyes

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[22] As discussed later in this essay, the motivation of RBBH to return and then proceed to travel back and forth is unclear.
[23] Examples of RBBH transmitting the teachings of Rabbi Yochanan can be found on Berachot 13b, Shabbat 21b, Eruvin 6b and Pesachim 53b.
[24] Examples of this phenomenon can be found on Berachot 24b, Megillah 12b, Avoda Zara 43a and chullin 45a.
[25] As seen on Shabbat 12b, Succah 43b, Yoma 78a, and Gitin 5b.
[26] Examples of RBBH citing Reish Lakish can be seen on Pesachim 18a, Bava Batra 72b, Avoda Zara 66b, and Zevachim 98a.
[27] See Gittin 28a, Menachot 30a, Pesachim 113b, Bava Kama 51b
[28] For example, he is recorded as having traveled to Pumbedisa (Shabbat 148a), Sura (Berachot 24b), and *Akra d'Agma* (Avoda Zara 39a).
[29] See Eruvin 55b and Yoma 39b
[30] See Pesachim 93b-94a.
[31] See Sanhedrin 110a, Yevamot 120b, and Megillah 18a.
[32] Chullin 55b
[33] Yevamot 120b
[34] Niddah 20b

grew weak and he was unable to judge and rule on the laws of niddah. It is not unreasonable to assume that his extensive travels may have contributed to his eventual decline in health. The Talmud[35] also records that while in Babylonia he suffered mightily at the hands of the Sassanid Empire. Upon being ransacked by government officials, RBBH proclaimed: "O' Merciful One! Or in your shadow, or in that of Esau (Rome[36])". RBBH was not happy to be in Babylonia and clearly preferred residence in Israel. To fully appreciate his identity as a transmitter of teachings and his preference for residence in Israel, an introduction to the relationship that existed between the communities of Israel and Babylonia at that time is in order.

The Relationship Between Israel and Babylonia

A full treatment of the complex and variegated relationship that existed between the Jewish communities of Israel and Babylonia, one that began with the destruction of the First Temple and extended to the times of the Geonim, is certainly beyond the extent of this paper. However, an examination of the Talmudic as well as extra-Talmudic evidence as to the relationship that existed in the times of the amoraim, in those of RBBH in particular, is quite relevant. As mentioned previously, there was a great deal of contact between the study halls and academies of the two communities.[37] There was a class of individuals known as the *nehutai,* those who traveled and transmitted amoraic teachings. Part of this group were Ulla, Rabin, Rabbi Dimmi, Rabbi Shmuel the son of Yehuda, and of course, RBBH[38]. Although

[35] Gittin 17a
[36] The Roman Empire was in control of Israel at that point in time.
[37] It is of course understood that the Babylonia of old encompassed a large landmass and that the communities within it were distinct, both geographically as well as ideologically. There is much to say about The goal of this paper is not to dispose of or downplay the significance of these discrepancies, but rather to notice general trends that defined these communities as opposed to those in Israel, and
[38] We also find reference to an anonymous transmitter of teachings. See Berachot 15a and 45b, Nedarim 77b and Yevamot 22a.

these individuals appear throughout the Talmud as encompassing the position of emissary, there is no clear reason provided as to the motivation of their travels. Did they purely do so for the sake of spreading the wisdom of the Torah? Or perhaps they happened to be traveling for ancillary reasons, say for business, and were then given the position of *nehutai* out of convenience? Did they possess official positions as transmitters, or did they use their journeys that they had to undertake for whatever reason for their own personal advantage, to teach and spread Torah?

Despite the ambiguities surrounding its institution[39], it is nevertheless clear that the *nehutai* served as a vital link between the communities of Israel and Babylonia. Further evidence of their relationship can be found in letters of correspondence that were sent between them. A common refrain throughout the Babylonian Talmud is "a letter came from the West", i.e. the land of Israel.[40] A similar ubiquitous expression is "they sent from there" (i.e. Israel)[41]. We also find in the Babylonian Talmud examples of letters sent in the opposite direction, from Babylonia to Israel, with various inquiries regarding matters of Jewish law.[42]

Further evidence of the connection of these communities is seen from the rabbinic personalities who immigrated to the land of Israel. We already find evidence of this in the Second Temple period, with the sage Hillel having immigrated to Israel and being appointed to the position of *Nassi* when the rabbinic leadership became aware of his great erudition.[43] Subsequent prominent figures who followed the same path include Rabbi Hiyya, a prominent disciple of Rabbi Judah the Prince, as well as Rabbi Elazar. Either way, the main point is that it is clear that there were close ties and connections maintained between the communities of

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[39] Unraveling these mysteries is certainly a rich topic for further research.
[40] See for example Shabbat 115a, Ketuvot 59b, Bava Batra 41b, and Shevuot 48b.
[41] See for example Sanhedrin 17b
[42] See for example Yevamot 115b, Gittin 86b, and Pesachim 103a.
[43] Pesachim 66a

Israel and Babylonia throughout the centuries, and certainly during the lifetime of RBBH.[44] However, despite the relationship and connection that existed between these two communities, the Talmudic evidence highlights the fact that this relationship was fraught with condescendingness, disrespect, and outright hostility.

There are many sources in the Talmud that bespeak the negative relationship that existed between the rabbinic centers of Israel and Babylonia.[45] We find many phrases and expressions in the Talmud that speak of the superiority that those who lived in Israel felt over those who lived outside of it, particularly Babylonia. For example, one rabbinic refrain was: "Those stupid Babylonians! Because they live in a land of darkness (i.e. Babylonia, which was located in a valley), they recite teachings that are dark (i.e. befuddled, nonsensical)".[46] We also find evidence pointing to the inferiority complex that the rabbis of Babylonia felt towards those in Israel. For example, Rava is quoted as stating the followig: "They (the rabbis of Israel) used to call us (Babylonians) stupid, now they will call us exceedingly

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[44] While the present study is concerned with the rabbinic connection of these communities, as embodied by the *nehutai*, the letters of correspondence, and the rabbis who immigrated to the land of Israel, there is much to consider regarding the broader societal connections that existed between them. For example, there is evidence that already in the times of the Amoraim there was a practice to send the deceased to Israel for burial. Furthermore, there is much to be said about the degree to which, if any, there existed an economic relationship between the two communities. As is normative in the Talmud, we are only given a small piece of the puzzle with vague allusions regarding these issues, as the Talmud is by and large concerned with the legal implications of these travels and is not interested in pursuing cultural-historical issues. For further reading on this subject, see "An Epistle Came from the West: Evidence for the Ties between the Jewish Communities in the Land of Israel and Babylonia during the Talmudic Period" by Safrai and Maeir.

[45] It needs to be emphasized that although there was a great deal of hatred, there are cases in which we find the respective communities offering a great deal of love and praise for one another. For example, Reish Lakish, someone who was rabidly and unapologetically anti-Babylonian, as will be demonstrated later in this essay, states (Succah 20a) that there were certain points in history in which the Torah was in danger of being forgotten and it was Babylonian rabbinc figures who moved to Israel and saved the Jewish people from calamity. Specifically, he offers this praise to Ezra, Hillel, and finally to his contemporaries, Rabbi Hiyya and his sons. Citing this passage is not intended as an act of defense nor apologetics with regards to the acrimony that existed. Rather, it is needed to understand that emotions and relationship dynamics are complex, variegated and multi-faceted, not simple, straight and black-and white. Nevertheless, the hatred that was palpable should not be downplayed, ignored or dismissed as insignificant.

[46] Pesachim 34b, Zevachim 60b and Menachot 52a

stupid".[47] Similarly, Abaye states "One of them (Israeli) is like two of us (Babylonians)".[48] Building on this remark, Rava comments "And when one of us goes to Israel, he is like two of them, for when Rabbi Jeremiah is here he cannot grasp what it is that the Rabbis are saying, but once he reaches Israel he states 'those stupid Babylonians' ".[49]

There are even more instances in the Talmud where this superiority complex manifests itself. The Talmud[50] records how the rabbis in Israel would say that the reason that the rabbis in Babylonia would wear fancy garments is because people would not have otherwise respected them for their lackluster scholarship. A similar passage[51] proclaims "come and see the difference between the mighty of Israel and the pious of Bavel", that the caliber of scholarship and piety of the two are absolutely incomparable. The Talmud[52] also relates that while the Torah scholars of Babylonia were excessively contentious with one another and engaged in endless and pointless quarrells, those of Israel were amenable to one another and were therefore able to reach proper *halakhic* conclusions. And of course in what is perhaps the most famous of these passages, the Talmud[53] states that "the air of the land of Israel makes one wise". Another passage of the Talmud[54] goes even further beyond the aforementioned sources to suggest that not only were the scholars of Israel of a higher caliber, so too was its rabble. It states that even the thieves and criminals of the land of Israel were of a higher moral and ethical caliber than those in Babylonia.

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[47] Yoma 57a
[48] Ketuvot 75a
[49] Ibid. Rava is commenting on the transformative power of the land of Israel. He is astounded by the observation that someone who is not so bright outside of Israel can undergo what appears to be a supernatural metamorphosis in which he turns into somewhat of a genius.
[50] Shabbat 145b and Rashi ad loc.
[51] Megillah 28b and Taanit 23b
[52] Sanhedrin 24a
[53] Bava Batra 158b
[54] Avodah Zara 26a

Conversely, we find scenarios in which the rabbis living in Israel had to swallow their pride and recognize that there were in fact very learned individuals living in Babylonia. The Talmud[55] records how Rabbi Yochanan could not defend his *halakhic* positions from the questions of Rav Kahana, who had recently immigrated from Babylonia to Israel, and was forced to admit defeat at his hands. Rabbi Yochanan is the one who in this context coined the oft cited phrase: "I thought that the Torah was yours (i.e addressing his students in Israel), but I now realize that it is theirs (the Babylonians)".

There are also passages in the Talmud where the entirety of the Babylonian Jewish community is criticized and looked down upon. For example,[56] when Reish Lakish would see crowds of Babylonian immigrants gathering in the streets of Israel, he would say: "When you came up from exile you did not form a crowd, and now you seek to form a crowd?" Rabbi Zera, an immigrant to Israel from Babylonia, is recorded[57] as criticizing the Babylonians for eating "bread with bread", as opposed to eating bread with a piece of fish or meat.

We find a similar phenomenon the opposite way as well. The Talmud[58] records that the well known amora Zeiri, an immigrant from Babylonia, refused Rabbi Yochanan's daughter in marriage, as he did not, nor did the majority of the Babylonian Jewish community, trust the purity of the lineage of those living in Israel.

It is interesting to note that we find a number of derogatory statements made about the Babylonians by Ulla, who was one of the *nehutai.* For example, the Talmud[59] recounts the following narrative: "Ulla traveled to Bavel and saw *porchot*[60]. He instructed them to bring their vessels inside, for rain is coming. However, no rain ended up coming. Ulla thus stated:

[55] Bava Kama 117a-117b.
[56] Song of Songs Rabbah 8:9
[57] Beitzah 16a and Nedarim 49b
[58] Kiddushin 71a
[59] Taanit 9b.
[60] The precise meaning of this term is discussed in the sugya.

'Just as the Babylonians are liars, so too are their rains' ". Ironically, the Talmud[61] records another story in which Ulla is forced to retract from his negative remarks about the Babylonians:

Ulla traveled to Bavel and saw that they sold a basket of dates for a *zuz.* He wondered to himself: 'They sell a basket of dates for a *zuz* yet they do not involve themselves in Torah!' (i.e. if it is so easy for them to make a living, then why don't they study more Torah!). That night, the dates caused him pain (i.e. diarrhea). He then proclaimed: 'They sell a basket of knives for a *zuz,* yet they still involve themselves with Torah!' (i.e. it is amazing how they learn despite the fact that they must work hard to earn a living, as it is impossible to rely upon dates alone).

The Talmud[62] recounts another story in which Ulla continues to insult the Babylonians:

The daughter of Rabbi Shmuel the son of Yehuda passed away. The Rabbis said to Ulla: 'Let us go and comfort him'. Ulla retorted: 'What do I need to busy myself with the Babylonians, for their consolation is in actuality blasphemy, for they say [to the mourner] 'what can you do', implying that if there was something to do then they would do it!' (i.e. and this would be circumventing the plan of God!).

In this same story, the Talmud recounts how when Ulla ends up going to comfort Rabbi Shmuel the son of Yehuda alone, he essentially says that his daughter passed away because she deserved it. Had she possessed any redeeming qualities, then she would have surely survived. This story only serves to further underscore the animosity and hatred that

[61] Ibid
[62] Bava Kama 38a-38b

Ulla personally, and those Jews living in Israel more broadly, felt towards their brethren living in Babylonia.

What is most intriguing, and certainly most relevant to the essay at hand, is that we find similar derogatory statements about Babylonia being promulgated by RBBH in the name of his master, Rabbi Yochanan. The Mishna[63] states: "They would make a ramp for him [i.e the person who would take the goat for *Azazael* to the desert] because of the Babylonians who would tear out his hair and say 'take it and go, take it and go!'". The Talmud[64] cites a comment from RBBH on this mishna: "They were not Babylonians, rather they were Alexandrians. And because they [i.e. the inhabitants of Israel] hated Babylonians, they called these people by their name". According to RBBH, the usage of 'Babylonians' in the Mishna was a borrowed expression used in a derogatory fashion to describe people that they did not like. We find the same phenomenon in another Mishna[65]: "If Yom Kippur fell out on Friday, the goat offering would be consumed in the evening, and the Babylonians would eat it raw[66] because they are not picky eaters"[67]. The Talmud[68] cites a teaching from RBBH in the name of Rabbi Yochanan[69]: "They were not Babylonians but rather Alexandrians. Since they hated

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[63] Yoma 66a
[64] Ibid 66b
[65] Menachot 99b
[66] It could not be cooked because cooking is forbidden on both Yom Kippur and Shabbat.
[67] "Not picky eaters" is my rough translation of the phrase in the Mishna *"she'da'atan yafeh"*. My translation certainly encapsulates the connotation of the Mishna but does not fully address how these words in the Mishna mean this. A full treatment of this phrase of the Mishna is beyond the scope of this essay.
[68] Menachot 100a
[69] Note that in the Vilna edition of the Talmud, here in Menachot this teaching is cited in the name of Rabbi Yochanan while on Yoma 66a it is merely cited in the name of RBBH. There are a number of manuscripts of Yoma that have just RBBH while others have RBBH in the name of Rabbi Yochanan. Interestingly, all of the manuscripts of Menachot (at least the ones perused by this author on genizah.org) have RBBH in the name of Rabbi Yochanan. This distinction has literary implications. If RBBH is the originator of this teaching, then it bespeaks the personal animosity that RBBH felt for the Babylonians. Conversely, if this was a teaching that RBBH was merely transmitting in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, then it represents the biases of his teacher that left their unduly mark on RBBH. As the majority of manuscripts in both Yoma and Menachot reflect the reading that this was in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, this will be the working assumption of this essay.

the Babylonians they called them by their name". We see from these sources that RBBH was personally exposed to the animosity of those living in Israel to those living in Bavel. There is another passage in the Talmud[70] in which we find that RBBH himself was personally discriminated against. Rabbi Elazar[71] was bathing in the Jordan River, and RBBH came along and extended his hand to him. Rabbi Elazar responded by saying that God hates you (i.e. all Babylonians) for not having returned to Israel to construct the Second Temple, and that he is not interested in RBBH's assistance. He goes on to cite a rabbinic exegetical teaching that if the Babylonians had returned in large flocks to the land of Israel in the times of Ezra, then the Second Temple would never have been destroyed.[72] [73]

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[70] Yoma 9b

[71] This is in accordance with the conclusion of the passage. It was initially thought that this story was that Reish Lakish was bathing and RBBH is the one who extended his hand, but this is rejected at the end of the day. There is another version that has it that this story did not involve RBBH whatsoever, rather the individual bathing was Reish Lakish and the one who extended his hand was Zeiri.

[72] Interestingly, this passage also appears in Song of Songs Rabbah 8:9 with an additional story. Rabbi Zeira walked into a store in Israel and was shooed away by the shopkeeper who cited this rabbinic exegesis. We see from this that the animosity that existed was not limited to the scholarly class but even extended to the average person. For an example of how this hatred spilled over from the world of speech to that of action, see Yerushalmi Berachot 2:5 in which Rabbi Kahana had to return to Babylonia because he was constantly being harassed, accosted and assailed by common people in Israel. A similar story appears in that passage with Rabbi Assi as well. However, it could be that all of this was due to the general atmosphere of bitterness and acrimony that existed between the scholars and common people in that time.

[73] This passage implies that the source of the hatred of those living in Israel for those in Babylonia is the fact that they did not return to build the Second Temple. This animosity continued to fester unabated for even hundreds of years after the Temple's destruction. This is also seen from the story of Reish Lakish's reaction to seeing a group of Babylonian immigrants standing together. Another similar potential source of animosity is gleaned from the above story of Ulla criticizing the Babylonians for their laziness regarding the study of Torah despite the apparent material abundance and wealth in Babylonia. Ulla saw them as lazy and complacent in the lives that they had built in Bavel and detested the fact that they had not dedicated themselves more wholeheartedly to religious pursuits. Another factor that could have contributed to this phenomenon is the possibility that the Babylonian immigrants sought to maintain their own distinct cultural identity even after moving to Israel, as is evidenced in the story of Rabbi Zeira criticizing the eating habits of those Babylonians who had settled in Israel (Rabbi Zeira is also seen offering a similar criticism in a passage on Niddah 20b). Another relevant factor is the reality that many of the Babylonians who moved to Israel did so on their own, leaving behind their families. Evidence of this can be found in a passage on Gittin 6b where Rabbi Abiathar compares one who moves to Israel and leaves his family behind can be described as in a certain sense fulfilling the verse (Joel 4:3): "They gave their son to a harlot and have sold their daughter for wine". Another potential source or reason for the animosity that existed is based on a passage of Talmud (Bava Kama 84b) that states that the reason that *halachically* speaking the rabbinic courts of Bavel possessed certain legal powers is because they served as representatives of the rabbinic courts that existed in Israel. Perhaps, the sense of superiority that the rabbis of Israel

Not only did RBBH personally experience discrimination because of his Babylonian origin, he even dished it out to his fellow Babylonians. For example, the Talmud[74] recounts how when RBBH traveled to Pumbedita, he refused to attend the public lecture of Rav Yehuda and had to literally be dragged there by force. The fact that he was the one who transmitted Rabbi Yochanan's aforementioned teaching identifying the term "Babylonians" in the Mishna as a pejorative also shows his role in spreading anti-Babylonian fervor. There is no doubt that he was influenced by the general attitudes and zeitgeist in Israel with regards to the Babylonian community. As mentioned above, another contributing factor to RBBH's outlook was probably the suffering he endured at the hands of the Sassanid Empire while visiting Babylonia. It is not unreasonable to assume that his hardships played a role in forming his attitude towards the Babylonian Jewish community.

Now that the tension between the Jewish communities in Israel and Babylonia, on both a broader societal level as well as a personal level for RBBH, has been established, this essay will now turn to examining the evidence of this that exists in the sugya in Bava Batra of RBBH's tales.

The Sugya in Bava Batra

The Mishna[75] delineates the laws regarding selling boats; which parts of the boat are presumed to be part of the sale unless otherwise specified. Is the sail assumed to be included in the deal? What about the mast? Is the plank part of the purchase? How about the

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developed was because of this *halachic* reality. Nevertheless, exploring the origin of this hatred and animosity is a topic in it of itself and beyond the scope of this essay and certainly a rich issue for further research. This essay will later present one approach and use it as a lens through which to view the stories of RBBH presented in the sugya in Bava Batra. For further discussion about this issue, see "Tension Between Palestinian Scholars and Babylonian Olim in Amoraic Palestine" by Joshua Schwartz.

[74] Shabbat 148a

[75] Bava Batra 73a

boatswain? What about the rest of the crew? These questions and more are dealt with in the Mishna. Interestingly, there are a number of terms that appear in the Mishna that the redactor of the Talmud felt were necessary to define, as they would be unfamiliar to the reader. The Talmud[76] also cites a beraita which expands the discussion of the Mishna: "Rabbi Natan says: 'One who sells a boat also sold the *bitzit.* Sumchus says: One who sells a boat also sold the *dugit.*" Commenting on this beraita, Rava states:

Bitzit is the same thing as *dugit* [i.e. they both mean a small boat]*;* Rabbi Natan, who was Babylonian, would call it *butzit* as per the general expression in Babylonia: 'the *butzit* of Maishan'; Sumchus who was of the land of Israel, would refer to it as *dugit,* as per the verse[77] 'and those who come after you in *sirot dugah* (fishing boats)'.

After this statement of Rava, the Talmud proceeds to cite many of the sea journeys that the different tannaim and amoraim undertook, beginning with Rabbah bar Nahmaini, continuing with RBBH, and concluding with an eclectic assortment of stories about various tannaim and amoraim.[78] The sugya then goes on to cite a number of aggadic teachings relating to the sea and its creatures, and even devotes an extended discussion to the famed and mythical Leviathan, as well as to the reward that the righteous will reap in the world-to-come.

What is fascinating is the juxtaposition of the aforementioned statement of Rava with the extended aggadic discussion. It must be noted that after this long discursion the sugya returns back to a lengthy legal discussion regarding the manner by which boats are acquired in Jewish law. The fact that all of this aggadah appears immediately after the statement of

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[76] Ibid

[77] Amos 4:2

[78] Deciphering the reason for the exact order and progression of the different tannaim and amoraim in this sugya is beyond the scope of this essay. It is clearly ahistorical, as a story of two tannaim, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, is cited much later in the sugya (74b). This is certainly a rich issue for further research.

Rava and not after the discussion regarding the legal method used to acquire boats is something that is, to borrow the rabbinic idiom, *omair dar'shaini,* an observation that is extremely significant, and one that necessitates explanation.

What is striking about the statement of Rava is the fact that it presents a dichotomy of Babylonia and Israel. Rabbi Natan, a native of Babylonia, describes the small boat based on expressions that the average person in his land would use. Conversely, Sumchus, a resident of the land of Israel, utilizes Biblical lexicon in his verbiage. While Rabbi Natan is rooted in the culture of his exile, Sumchus remains immersed in and connected to the zeitgeist of his people.[79] Furthermore, the verse that Rava cites to justify Sumchus is also reflective of this Israel versus exile dialectic. The prophet Amos describes how the people of Israel and their children will be carried away into exile in boats. On the one hand the prophet is exhorting the people of Israel living in the mountains of Samaria, yet on the other hand what is being described in this verse is exile.

This dialectic that Rava presents highlights the disparity of mindsets that exists between those Jews who live in exile versus those who dwell in Israel. For the Jew in exile, the Torah is by and large relegated to the synagogue and to practices of worship. The agricultural laws do not apply in exile. The whole *weltanschauung* of a Jew in exile is influenced and molded by the society in which he lives. This idea is embodied in Rava's statement that the lexicon of Rabbi Natan was consistent with the speech used by the everyday person in Babylonia. Conversely, for the Jew living in Israel, where the language of the land is Hebrew, the places of the Bible are real and can sometimes be located, the laws of the Torah move beyond the Temple and the synagogue and infiltrate the mundane aspects

[79] The fact that Babylonian society as a whole was an oral culture might have contributed to this phenomenon. For an elaboration on this subject, see "Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud" by Dr. Yaakov Elman.

of life, the Torah as a whole serves to his overall cultural identity. This is embodied by the fact that the expressions of Sumchus were borrowed from the Bible. For him, the Bible was part of his everyday life, and a core part of his identity that was ingrained into the fiber of his being.

RBBH, a man who was originally born in Babylonia and subsequently moved to Israel, a *nehutai,* an individual who was constantly on the move between the communities of Israel and the diaspora, had to navigate the complex tensions of these disparate cultures, on both a personal as well as a communal level. What follows is an exposition of the stories of RBBH in light of the above analysis.

The first story about RBBH is as follows:[80]

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: I have seen a certain frog [*akrokta*] that was as large as the fort [*akra*] of Hagronya. And how large is the fort of Hagronya? It is as large as sixty houses. A snake came and swallowed the frog. A raven came and swallowed the snake, and flew up and sat in a tree. Come and see how great is the strength of the tree, which could bear the weight of that raven. Rav Pappa bar Shmuel said: If I had not been there and seen this, I would not believe it.

The idea that the various creatures consuming one another is symbolic of the various empires that succeeded one another in ruling over Israel is already rooted in traditional Jewish thought.[81] In light of the above analysis, this idea can be taken a step further. Each empire that ruled over Israel had a distinct set of norms, customs and values that marked it as

[80] This translation is taken from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. All of the translations of the stories of RBBH that follow are taken from this source.
[81] Maharsha ad loc. This imagery is also found in the Bible, primarily in the book of Daniel.

unique. As each empire took over, its culture and set of ideals took hold in society, marking the previous culture as a relic of the past. Each creature was the size of sixty houses. A house is the bedrock of society, the place where the next generation is raised and educated, and where the values of one age are passed down to the next.[82] Sixty in traditional Jewish lore is representative of something which is all-encompassing, that which negates what is subsumed within it.[83] Thus, each monster, the size of sixty houses, represents how the new set of values and culture that each empire brought with it served to negate and eliminate the old ways of life and ideas. However, the tree, symbolic of the Torah[84], withstands the test of time. Even though a foreign culture may try to rest on its branches and weigh it down and destroy it, the Torah nevertheless stands the test of time and continues to thrive. This idea, although ostensibly straightforward and simplistic, is something that those living in exile could not fully grasp. Thus, Rabbi Papa the son of Shmuel, an inhabitant of Babylonia, understanding the draw that foreign culture had to the exilic Jew, had to rise up and testify that it is possible for the Torah to survive and remain strong in the face of great pressure and upheaval. By telling this story, RBBH is trying to convey this message to the inhabitants of the communities of Babylonia.

The next story of RBBH is as follows:

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling in a ship and we saw a certain fish in whose nostril [*be'usyeih*] a mud eater [*akhla tina*], i.e., a type of insect, had sat and killed

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[82] It is for this reason that the term 'house' in rabbinic thought is classically associated with one's wife, the one who is traditionally primarily responsible for running the household, raising the children, and passing on the values of yesteryear. See for example Shabbat 118a that Rabbi Yose would call his wife "my house". See also Yoma 13a, Nedarim 67a-67b, and Chullin 141a for examples where the term "house" in the Bible is understood as referring to one's wife.

[83] For an example within Jewish law, the halacha is that if a piece of meat absorbs a drop of milk but the ratio of the piece of meat to the milk is at least 60:1, then the milk is viewed as insignificant and it is permitted to consume the meat. See Chullin 97a-97b.

[84] As seen from the verse: "It is a tree of life to those who grasp it" (Proverbs 3:18).

him. And the waters thrust the fish and threw it upon the shore. And sixty districts were destroyed by the fish, and sixty districts ate from it, and another sixty districts salted its meat to preserve it. And they filled from one of its eyeballs three hundred flasks[85] of oil. And when we returned there after the twelve months of the year had passed, we saw that they were cutting beams from its bones, and they had set out to build those districts that had been destroyed.

Continuing with the aforementioned symbolism of monstrous creatures, this story comes to highlight that it does not take much to destroy a culture. Even a few small cracks can lead to the collapse of an entire way of life. Sixty is again used to symbolize totality and that which is all encompassing. While the death of a culture brings doom and gloom for some, others use it to construct their own outlook and develop their own beliefs. However, all of this is not true for the Torah. Although it may appear that the Jewish people have been exiled and that they are subsumed and assimilated into the nations around them, it is possible for them to arise from the ruins and rebuild and reinvigorate themselves. The Torah is everlasting and will never be destroyed nor forgotten by its people. This idea is highlighted by the passage of twelve months of time before rebuilding the destroyed cities, a number that represents rebirth and renewal in traditional rabbinic thought.[86] The message that RBBH

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[85] As to the significance of the number three-hundred, Rashbam (Pesachim 119a s.v. *masuy she'losh mai'ot)* argues that this is the standard number utilized in the Talmud as an exaggeration. Rabbi Zadok of Lublin (*Sichat Malachei HaShareit* 3) elaborates that the letter *tav* in Hebrew is representative of that which is above nature, while *shin* denotes the borders of natural existence. Furthermore, the *gematriya* of *shin* is 300. In choosing 300 as the classical expression of hyperbole, the rabbis sought to emphasize the limitations of this world when compared to the omnipotence of God, even in a symbolic story such as this one.

[86] For example, the Talmud (Shabbat 33b) records that Rabbi Shimon dwelled in a cave initially for twelve years and then twelve months. The first period of time represented a fundamental transition for him, the result of which led him to rejecting the importance of the mundane activities necessary to support and sustain life in this world. The second period of time represented another transformation in which he was able to adjust his attitude and recognize the prominence of enterprises undertaken, to borrow a rabbinic idiom, *yishuvo shel olam,* to maintain the functioning of society. The Mishna (Eduyot 2) cites a tradition from Rabbi Akiva that relates a number of transformative events with twelve months. These include the punishment meted out to the generation of The Flood, the suffering that

wished to convey to the Jews of Babylonia is that while foreign ideas may at times appear to dominate, the Torah is what will come out on top and is what should be clinged to and used to form one's cultural identity.

The third of RBBH's stories is as follows:

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling on a ship and we saw a certain fish upon which sand had settled, and grass grew on it. We assumed that it was dry land and went up and baked and cooked on the back of the fish, but when its back grew hot it turned over. And were it not for the fact that the ship was close by, we would have drowned.

Man plans and God laughs. When in exile, the Jew is counseled to pray for the welfare of the government, contribute to the economy, and do his best to ensure the prosperity of the society in which he finds himself. However, very often there is more to a given situation than that which meets the eye. The very effort invested in enhancing society is often the seed that blossoms into the flower of expulsion and destruction. If not for the Jew's strict adherence and identification with the Torah, a source of life for those who cling to it, he would have drowned in the sea of exile eons ago. RBBH is warning the members of the Babylonian Jewish community that although it is necessary to contribute to the land of their exile, things can always turn for the worse. Because of this, one's primary cultural identification must be with the Torah, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel.

The fourth story of RBBH is as follows:

Job endured, the plagues in Egypt, the future justice to be meted out to Gog and Magog, and the judgement of the wicked in Gehinnom. The number twelve has also been classically associated with the idea of completion and totality, as seen from the number of months in a year, the number of zodiacs, and the number of tribes of Israel (see Joshua Buch's "The Biblical Number 12 and the Formation of the Ancient Nation of Israel" for an elaboration on this idea). These two layers behind the number twelve, transformation and totality, complement one another, as a transformation only transpires when there is a total and complete change that occurs.

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling in a ship and the ship traveled between one fin [*shitza*] and the other fin of a fish for three days and three nights[87]. The fish was swimming in the opposite direction of the ship, so that it was swimming upward against the wind and the waves, and we were sailing downward. And if you would say that the ship did not travel very fast, when Rav Dimi came from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia[88] he said: In the short amount of time required to heat a kettle of water, that ship can travel sixty parasangs.[89] And another demonstration of its speed is that a horseman shot an arrow, and yet the ship was traveling so swiftly that it outraced it. And Rav Ashi said: That fish was a sea *gildana*, which has two sets of fins.

Although the winds and waves of the ever fickle situation of exile may sometimes be in the Jew's favor, there will always be a foreign beast swimming against the tide of the times, large, menacing and dangerous. RBBH lived in a time in which the Sassanian Empire had recently risen to power in Babylonia, succeeding the benign and benevolent Parthian Empire.[90] He was rebuking his counterparts in Babylonia for having grown used to exile and enjoying the prosperity they endured under the Parthian Empire. Such success was but the wind of times, as fleeting as a crashing wave, and soon a new beast arose that swam in the opposite direction, with a totally different approach to how to treat the Jew. Although it may put in a great deal of effort to attempt a counter-cultural revolution[91], and may do so with

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[87] This is an allusion to the prophet Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the beast for three days and nights. RBBH is rebuking the Jews of Babylonia by comparing their dwelling in exile to that of Jonah running away from God and being swallowed by a sea creature.

[88] It is no coincidence that in this tale that is intended to serve as a rebuke towards the Jews living in exile, RBBH cites Rabbi Dimi, another one of his fellow *nehutai.*

[89] Sixty over here evokes the same imagery as it did above, of something that is great in number and all encompassing.

[90] Jacob Neusner, "JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES iii. PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN PERIODS," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, XV/1, pp. 96-103 available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/judeo-persian-communities-iii-parthian-and-sasanian-periods (accessed 05/13/2021)

[91] The boiling of water into steam represents an attempt to change the water in which the ship finds itself, an effort on the part of the Jew in exile to fight against the zeitgeist of his time and transform it.

great cunning and precision[92], the Jewish community in exile will not succeed in traversing and conquering the beast of foreign culture.

The following is the fifth story of RBBH:

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling in a ship and we saw a certain bird that was standing with water up to its ankles [*kartzuleih*] and its head was in the sky. And we said to ourselves that there is no deep water here, and we wanted to go down to cool ourselves off. And a Divine Voice emerged and said to us: Do not go down here, as the ax of a carpenter fell into it seven years ago and it has still not reached the bottom.[93] And this is not because the water is so large and deep. Rather, it is because the water is turbulent. Rav Ashi said: And that bird is called *ziz sadai*, wild beast, as it is written: "I know all the fowls of the mountains; and the *ziz sadai* is Mine" (Psalms 50:11).

The Jew in exile may seek to wholeheartedly embrace foreign culture, yet at the same time remain connected to the values, traditions and ideology of his faith. He attempts to mimic the *ziz sadai*, to keep his ankles enveloped in water, the norms of his time, while at the same time maintaining his head in the sky, connected to the lofty ideals and beliefs of his tradition. However, RBBH warns that the waters of foreign culture are too turbulent to conquer and must be avoided altogether.

The sixth story of RBBH is as follows:

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[92] This idea is conjured by the imagery of an archer on horseback, who must be very precise in the pull of his bow, especially because he is moving at such a rapid pace.

[93] The imagery of an axe falling in water is certainly reminiscent of a similar story with Elisha (Kings 2, 6: 1-6). In that episode, the students of Elisha go to build themselves a new community in Israel because the one which they currently inhabit is too small for them. Perhaps RBBH is alluding to the fact that the Jews of Babylonia should leave their current residences and build a new community in Israel.

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling in the desert and we saw these geese whose wings were sloping because they were so fat, and streams of oil flowed beneath them. I said to them: Shall we have a portion of you in the World-to-Come? One raised a wing, and one raised a leg [signaling an affirmative response]. When I came before Rabbi Elazar, he said to me: The Jewish people will eventually be held accountable for the suffering of the geese.

In traditional rabbinic lore, fowl represents wisdom,[94] as does oil.[95] It is known that there were many amoraim who left the land of Israel to become teachers and leaders of Jewish communities in Babylonia.[96] They were fattened and saturated with Torah, and went out to the spiritual wasteland of Babylonia to spread its wisdom. RBBH once encountered one of these amoraim and wondered if they would see each other in the World-to-Come. Was this amora justified to be living outside of Israel? Did the merit of his spreading Torah really permit him to live in a foreign land in the mud of an alien culture? This amora thought that he was justified. However, Rabbi Elazar, a native of the land of Israel, offered a different perspective. He surmised that although this amora was justified and was significantly contributing to society, the Jewish community in Babylonia would nevertheless eventually have to be punished for causing such a great scholar to leave the land of Israel.

What follows is the first of a number of tales of RBBH interacting with an Arab merchant:

And Rabba bar bar Ḥana said: Once we were traveling in the desert and we were accompanied by a certain Arab who would take dust and smell it and say: This is the road to

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[94] In his commentary on this story, Maharsha notes that the Talmud (Berachot 57a) states that he who sees a bird in his dream will become wise.
[95] See Menachot 85b
[96] Rav and Shmuel are perhaps the most prominent examples of this phenomenon.

such and such a place, and that is the road to such and such a place. We said to him: How far are we from water? And he said to us: Bring me dust. We brought it to him, and he said: Eight parasangs. Later, we said this a second time, and gave him dust, and he said to us that we are at a distance of three parasangs. I switched the type of dust to test him, but I could not confuse him, as he was an expert in this matter.

When in the barrenness of exile, the Jew is bound to encounter gentiles who will impress him with their ingenuity. He will test them regarding a variety of matters of wisdom, and they will successfully pass all of his examinations. RBBH begrudgingly admits that even he himself, one of the *nehutai,* someone who received a dose of spiritual nourishment from Israel on a consistent basis, was subject to being influenced and enamored by the gentile culture of foreign lands. This serves as a warning to those who dwell permanently in exile; if he could fall prey to such enticement, then they certainly could as well.

What follows is the second of the Arab merchant stories:

That Arab said to me: Come, I will show you the dead of the wilderness; I went and saw them and they had the appearance of one who is intoxicated, and they were lying on their backs. And the knee of one of them was elevated, and he was so enormous that the Arab entered under his knee while riding a camel and with his spear upright, and he did not touch him. I cut one corner of the sky-blue garment that contains ritual fringes of one of them, and we were unable to walk. The Arab said to me: Perhaps you took something from them? Return it, as we know by tradition that one who takes something from them cannot walk. I then returned the corner of the garment, and then we were able to walk. Then I came before the Sages, they said to me in rebuke: Every Abba is a donkey, and every bar bar Ḥana is an idiot. For the purpose of clarifying what *halakha* did you do that? If you wanted to know

whether the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Shammai or in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel, in that case there was no need to take anything with you, as you should have simply counted the threads and counted the joints.

RBBH was a man whose religion was alive, a person whose spiritual life animated not just the synagogue but also every step that he took. Someone like him would be impressed with tzitzit, the garment that announced to all that one is Jewish, the quintessential Jewish uniform. And all the more so coming from the generation that had died in the desert. Although they had rejected the land and its implications for creating a national culture in which God could be felt at every turn, they nevertheless clung to the mitzvah of tzitzit and thereby broadcast their Jewish persona. This is exactly what he needed. This is precisely what he needed to show his counterparts in Babylonia. Nevertheless, this idea still did not click with them. When he next visited his Babylonian counterparts[97], he was disappointed to find their outright rejection of this idea. They surmised that if there was no principle of Jewish law to be derived from this artifact, then there was no value in obtaining it.

What follows is the next story of RBBH and the Arab merchant:

That Arab also said to me: Come, I will show you Mount Sinai. I went and saw that scorpions were encircling it, and they were standing as high as white donkeys. I heard a Divine Voice saying: Woe is Me that I took an oath; and now that I took the oath, who will nullify it for me? When I came before the Sages, they said to me in rebuke: Every Abba is a donkey, and every bar bar Ḥana is an idiot. You should have said: Your oath is nullified. And Rabba bar bar Ḥana did not nullify the oath because he reasoned: Perhaps God is referring to

[97] The Talmud describes them merely as 'Rabbanan' without specifying their residence. One of the stories mentioned earlier describes Rav Dimi as coming from Israel to Bavel to deliver a teaching. The argument can therefore be made that when we find the same term of 'coming' in this story, it connotes arriving before the rabbis in Babylonia.

the oath that He will not flood the earth again. But the Sages would argue that if that were so, why say: Woe is Me?

As RBBH continued to rebuke the rabbis living in Babylonia, the message began to seep through.[98] They began to develop a guilty conscience for remaining in exile and began viewing the world through this prism of remorse. Through such a lens they supposed that the Divine Voice proclaiming "woe is to me" must be referring to their exile, and that God truly wants them back and hates the fact that they are not on their land. There is no other possible reason as to why God would be upset. Lacking this emotional turmoil, RBBH was able to view the situation more objectively and realize that there might be other meanings and implications of this Divine Voice emanating forth.

The next tale of RBBH and the Arab merchant is as follows:

The Arab also said to me: Come, I will show you those who were swallowed by the earth due to the sin of Korah. I saw two rifts in the ground that were issuing smoke. The Arab took a shearing of wool, and dipped it in water, and inserted it on the head of a spear, and placed it in there. And when he removed the wool, it was scorched. He said to me: Listen to what you hear; and I heard that they were saying: Moses and his Torah are true, and they, i.e., we in the earth, are liars. The Arab further said to me: Every thirty days Gehenna returns them to here, like meat in a pot that is moved around by the boiling water as it cooks. And every time they say this: Moses and his Torah are true, and they, i.e., we in the earth, are liars.[99]

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[98] I would surmise that RBBH's encounter with members of the generation of the desert in the previous story affected this transformation. Recalling the sin of this generation must have left a mark on the rabbis of Babylonia and spurred them to engage in introspection.

[99] Although the version of this story presented here in the Bavli finishes by portraying Korach's followers in an unfavorable light, the one that appears in the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 18) ends off on a positive note, that in the future God will take them out of the Earth and end their suffering. As I go on to elaborate, the goal of the Bavli is to demonstrate how the rabbis of Babylonia underwent a transformation when hearing this inspiring story of the wicked receiving what they deserve. Diluting the story with a happy ending would obstruct this goal.

The message of RBBH continued to resonate with the rabbis of Babylonia. The rebellion of Korach was arguably the greatest challenge presented to the authority of the Torah of all time. Witnessing the retribution of such evildoers would certainly be inspiring to anyone who's cultural identity is intertwined with the Torah. Fascinatingly, in this story the rabbis do not complain. We do not find any witty remarks coming from them. There are no character assassinations of RBBH. There is just silence. They are overtaken by a sense of awe, joy, and inspiration. There is nothing to say.

The final story is as follows:

This Arab also said to me: Come, I will show you the place where the earth and the heavens touch each other. I took my basket and placed it in a window of the heavens. After I finished praying, I searched for it but did not find it. I said to him: Are there thieves here? He said to me: This is the heavenly sphere that is turning around; wait here until tomorrow and you will find it.

Although RBBH has constantly been pushing his messages to his fellows dwelling in Babylonia, there is still one lesson that he needs to learn. Life has its ups and downs. The human experience is a rollercoaster. There are highs and lows. It is a never ending cycle of good and bad. Sometimes, a person will run off to pray, to involve himself in sacred matters, and will forget that spirituality extends even to the mundane, even to a basket of food. However, even though he may have one bad day, that does not mean that his fate is sealed. Notwithstanding a lousy experience, there is always room for improvement the next day. It is not always possible to constantly maintain the level that RBBH aspires to, but the possibility for renewal and reinvigoration is nevertheless everpresent.

Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to present a broad discussion of the famous tales of RBBH. I initially presented a brief summary of some of the existing interpretations of these stories and why I found them to be lacking. I proceeded to offer background to the life of RBBH; who he was, the culture that he lived in, and the two worlds that he had to navigate. I then suggested a number of novel interpretations to the adventures of RBBH in light of this information. I proposed that as the bridge between the two worlds of Israel and Babylonia, RBBH utilized these tales to reprimand the rabbinic scholars of Babylonia for not moving to Israel and for being entrenched in foreign culture. As someone who lived in both worlds and understood the challenges and complexities of each one, he saw himself as uniquely suited to address his colleagues shortcomings and encourage them to be better. The stories as a whole serve as a wake up call to those in exile to take religion as something beyond ceremony and make it part of their identity, to incorporate it as an essential component of their persona. Religion is something that must be a part of every fiber of a Jew's being and something that molds his *weltanschauung*. It must be the prism through which the whole world is viewed and contextualized. It is not something that can merely be relegated to the synagogue and religious ceremonies. My hope is that this essay will add to the great body of scholarship that has been produced on these stories, and that future scholars will find my work useful in their research.

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