



## To Laugh or to Cry?

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## I. Scene 1: The Challenge

### 1. Bavli Bekhorot 8b-9a (translation by Christine Hayes)

א"ל קיסר לרבי יהושע בן חנניה נחש לכמה מיעבר ומוליד א"ל לשב שני והא סבי דבי אתונא ארבעינהו ואוליד לתלת הנהו מיעברי הוו מעיקרא ד' [שנין] והא קמשמשי שמושי אינהו נמי משמשי כאדם! והא חכימי אינהו אן חכימין מינייהו אי חכימת זיל זכינהו ואיתינהו לי אמר ליה כמה הוו שיתין גברי אמר ליה עביד לי ספינתא דאית בה שיתין בתי וכל ביתא אית בה שיתין ביסתרקי עבד ליה...

The emperor said to R. Joshua b. Hanania, "How long is the snake pregnant [before it] gives birth?"

He said, "Seven years."

[The emperor said,] "But didn't the Sages of the Athenian school mate them and [the female] gave birth in three [years]?"

[R. Yehoshua said,] "Those were pregnant beforehand for four [years]."

[The emperor said,] "But they had sex [which pregnant animals don't do]!"

[He said,] "[Snakes] have sex like humans" [i.e., even when pregnant].

[The emperor said,] "But are not [the Athenian sages] wise men [and therefore trustworthy on this matter]?"

[R. Yehoshua said,] "We are wiser than they."

[The emperor said,] "If you are wise, go and defeat them, and bring them to me."

[R. Yehoshua] said, "How many of them are there?"

[The emperor said,] "Sixty persons."

[R. Yehoshua said,] "Make a ship for me containing sixty compartments, each compartment containing sixty cushions [*bistarkei*]." He did this for him...

## II. Scene 2: Questions

### 2. Bavli Bekhorot 8b-9a (cont.)

מילחא כי סריא במאי מלחי לה אמר להו בסילתא דכודניתא ומי איכא סילתא לכודנתא  
ומילחא מי סרי

[They asked,] “When salt becomes unsavory, wherewith is it salted?”

He said to them, “With the after-birth of a mule.”

[They said,] “And is there an after-birth of a mule?”

[He said to them,] “And can salt become unsavory?”

בני לן ביתא באוירא דעלמא אמר שם תלא בין רקיעא לארעא אמר להו אסיקו לי ליבני  
וטינא

[They said,] “Build us a house in the sky.”

He pronounced the Name [of the Deity], [suspended himself in the air,] and hung between heaven and earth. He said to them, “Bring me up bricks and clay from down there [and I will build it].”

מציעתיה דעלמא היכא זקפה לאצבעתיה אמר להו הכא א"ל ומי יימר אייתו אשלי ומשחו

[They said:] “Where is the center of the earth?”

He pointed with his finger and said to them, “Here.”

They said to him, “How can you prove it?”

[He said,] “Bring ropes and measure.”

אית לן בירא בדברא עיילא למתא א"ל אפשילו לי חבלי מפארי ואעייליה

[They said,] “We have a pit in the field. Bring it to the town.”

He said to them, “Knot ropes of bran flour for me and I will bring it in.”

אית לן ריחיא דתבירא חייטיה אמר כרוכו לי מיניה גרדי ואיחייטיה

[They said,] “We have a broken millstone. Sew it.”

He said to them, "Spin threads for me and I will sew it."

משרא דסכיני במאי קטלי בקרנא דחמרא ומי איכא קרנא לחמרא ומי איכא משרא  
דסכיני

[They asked,] "A garden plot of knives, how does one cut it down?"

[He said,] "With the horns of an ass."

[They said,] "But does an ass have horns?"

[He said,] "And is there a garden plot of knives?"

אייתו ליה תרי ביעי א"ל הי דוגתא אוכמתי והי דוגתא חיוורתא אייתי להו איהו תרי גביני  
אמר להו הי דעיזא אוכמתי והי דעיזא חיוורתא

They brought him two eggs. They asked him, "Which is from a black hen and which is from a white hen?"

He brought them two cheeses and asked them, "Which is from a black goat and which is from a white goat?"

ורצוצא דמית מהיכא נפיק רוחיה מהיכא דעל נפק

[They asked him,] "A chicken that died [in its shell], where does its soul exit?"

[He said to them,] "From where it entered, it exits."

אחוי לן מנא דלא שוי חביליה אייתו (כל חד וחד) בודיא פשטוה לא הוה עייל בתרעא אמר  
להו אייתו מרי סיתרוה היינו מנא דלא שוו חביליה

[They said to him,] "Bring us something that is not worth the loss it causes."

He brought a mat of reeds and spread it out. It would not fit through the door [being too long and wide]. He said to them, "Bring spades and tear down the wall [around the door of the building]. They brought spades and tore down the wall. This was something that was not worth the loss it causes."

### III. The End: Futility

#### 3. Bavli Bekhorot 8b-9a (cont.)

איתינהו כל חד וחד כי חזי שיתין ביסתרקי אמר כולהו חבראי להכא אתו אמר ליה  
לספונא שרי ספינתך בהדי דקאתו שקל עפרא מעפרייהו

He brought all of them [to eat in the ship, each to his separate chamber]. When they saw the sixty cushions, they [each] said, “All of my colleagues are coming here [to my chamber].”

כי מטי לבי בליעי מלא כוזא דמיא מבי בליעי כד אתו אוקמינהו קמי קיסר חזנהו דהו  
מעני א"ל הני לאו נינהו שקל מעפרייהו ושדא עילווייהו אקשו לאפי מלכא אמר ליה כל  
דבעית עביד בהו

R. Yehoshua said to the captain, “Release your ship [and set sail].” As they were going, he took some dirt from their [native] soil. When they reached a whirlpool, he filled a jug with water from the whirlpool. When they arrived [in Jerusalem], he presented them to the emperor who saw that they were depressed [being far from their native land].

[The emperor] said to [R. Yehoshua], “These are not they [the same sages].” [R. Yehoshua] took some of their dirt and threw it on them. They grew haughty towards the King. He said to [R. Joshua,] “Whatever you desire, do with them.”

אייתינהו מיא דאייתי מבי בליעי שדינהו בתיגדא אמר להו מליוה להו ואיזילו לכו מלו  
ושדו ביה קמאי קמאי ובלע להו מלו עד דשמיט כתפייהו ובלו להו ואזול

[R. Yehoshua] brought the water from the whirlpool and poured it into a vessel [*betigada*]. He said to them, “Fill this and depart.” They filled [pitchers] and poured [the water] into [the vessel] gradually, but it was absorbed. They went on filling until [the joints] of their shoulders became dislocated and they perished.