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חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

DID A RABBI REALLY JUST SAY THAT?!

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A conversation with the groom's father at a homospeciesist heterosexual wedding may be the worst possible context for jokes about the Biblical prohibitions against acts of bestiality, incest, and male homosexuality. Yet that is the context in which the *tanna* Bar Kappara chooses to ply his humor on those topics.

Bar Kappara's "jokes" are a series of riddles about the meaning of the terms "zimah", "tevel", and "toeivah", which are used in Vayikra 18 and 20 to describe those sexual sins. The folk etymology he offers for "toeivah" is "toeh atah bah", meaning "You go astray when engaging in it". This etymology has been used variously to deny the reality of homosexual desire – "You only think you want it" – and to deny that the prohibition has any moral significance- "it is merely an error". Neither of these approaches explains why Bar Kappara offers roughly identical etymologies for *zimah* – "zeh mah hi", "What is this", and *tevel* – "*tarlin yesh bah*", or "Does this have any spice". More significantly, neither makes any effort to explain the joke.

Nor will I. But I hope to make some contribution toward understanding the context. Maybe if we move closer to understanding why Bar Kappara said these things there and then, we can eventually understand what he meant. I look forward to your suggestions.

The story I've referred to takes place at the wedding of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (known as Rebbe)'s son Shim'on. As told on Bavli Nedarim 50b-51a, the story begins:

רבי עבד ליה הלולא לר"ש ברבי.

כתב על בית גננא:

עשרין וארבעה אלפין ריבואין דינרין נפקו על בית גננא דין

ולא אזמניה לבר קפרא.

אמר ליה:

אם לעוברי רצונו כך, לעושי רצונו על אחת כמה וכמה!

אזמניה.

אמר:

לעושי רצונו בעולם הזה כך, לעוה"ב עכ"ו!

Rebbe made a wedding for Rabbi Shimon son of Rebbe.

He wrote on the wedding house:

24000 myriad dinarim were expended on this wedding house

but he did not invite Bar Kappara.

He said to him:

If to those who violate His will such, to those who do His will how much more so!

He invited him.

He said:

To those who do His will in this world such, in the Coming World how much more so!

The immediate narrative difficulty is that we are never told why Bar Kappara wasn't invited. Rashi suggests that Rebbe knew Bar Kappara would make him laugh, and he did not want to; the Shitah Mekubetzet quotes an anonymous suggestion that Rebbe simply forgot.

Rashi's reading assumes that Bar Kappara's graffiti extends for two lines: "You spent a fortune on the hall, and yet you were too cheap to invite me!" Rebbe eventually simply gives in to Bar Kappara. This sets the tone for the entire relationship. Rebbe tries to find Bar Kappara insufferable, for good reason, but in the end cannot resist him.

The Shitah, however, may be telling a very different story. Very likely he had the version preserved in the Eyn Yaakov, which moves line 4 up to line 2.

רבי עבד ליה הלולא לר"ש ברבי.

ולא אזמניה לבר קפרא.

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But he did not invite Bar Kappara.

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24000 myriad dinarim were expended on this wedding house!

In this reading, Bar Kappara's responds to the accidental noninvitation with an attack on Rebbe's conspicuous consumption that is not leavened by any humorous comparison to the added expense of a single guest. He adds to the attack by calling Rebbe a transgressor of G-d's will. Rebbe nonetheless extends the invitation that he had intended in the first place, and Bar Kappara acknowledges the invitation with a blessing.

There is a third possibility, based on the standard text. Rebbe made a wedding for his son, intending to invite everyone. Bar Kappara reacts to what he sees as unjustified extravagance by graffitiing the hall, so Rebbe decides not to invite him. But when he sees that Bar Kappara can cause more damage outside than in, he extends the invitation after all.

At this point the Talmud interrupts to provide a backstory.

יומא דמח"ך ביה רבי אתיא פורענותא לעלמא.

א"ל לבר קפרא:

לא תבדיחן ויהיבנא לך ארבעין גריו חטי.

א"ל:

ליחזי מר דכל גריוא דבעינא שקילנא

שקל דיקולא רבה, חפייה כופרא וסחפיה על רישיה, ואזל ואמר ליה:

ליכיל לי מר ארבעין גריו חטי דרשינא בך.

אחור רבי, א"ל:

לאו אזהרתך דלא תבדחן?

א"ל:

חִיטִי דְרִשְׁינָא קָא נְסִיבְנָא.

On the day that Rebbe laughed, catastrophe came to the world.

Rebbe said to Bar Kappara:

"Don't make me laugh, and I will give you four measure of wheat."

Bar Kappara said to Rebbe:

"Sir will see that I can take whatever measures I want."

He took a large basket, tarred it, and put it on his head, and went and said to Rebbe:

"Let sir give me the four measures of wheat that you owe me."

Rebbe laughed and said to him:

"Didn't I warn you not to make me laugh?"

Bar Kappara replied:

"I just came to get the wheat you owe me."

This interjection is clearly the basis for Rashi's reading, and fits it extremely well.

The next line, however, seems off-key and ominous. Bar Kappara says to Rebbe's daughter: "Tomorrow I will drink wine while your father dances and your mother sings." On the assumption that this takes place the day before the wedding, why can't he just celebrate together with them?

Here the Talmud inserts as background that Rebbe had a very wealthy son in-law named Ben El'asah, who was invited to the wedding. We then flash to the wedding, where Bar Kappara tells his riddles. He won't give the answers – or stop talking – until Rebbe and his wife agree to his demands for dancing and singing, so that his prediction to Rebbe's daughter comes true. Ben El'asah and his wife leave in disgust. The Talmud ends the narrative arc by citing a beraita in which Rebbe defends Ben El'asah's extraordinarily expensive haircut by saying that is was a demonstration of the otherwise unknown priestly haircut described in Yechezkel 44:20.

The literary structure is: We start with Bar Kappara's critique of Rebbe's conspicuous consumption, and we end with Rebbe's defense of Ben El'asah's conspicuous consumption. Bar Kappara and Ben El'asah are the opposing poles. One has to wonder whether the daughter of Rebbe to whom Bar Kappara made his prediction is the wife of Bar El'asah; whether the expense of Rabbi Shimon's wedding was partially underwritten by his wealthy brother in-law; and whether Bar Kappara had not at some point harbored the hope of becoming a son in law himself.

Here we need to introduce two other stories about Bar Kappara, Rebbe, and Rebbe's son and son in-law.

1) Bavli Moed Kattan 16a:

רבי שמעון בר רבי ובר קפרא הוו יתבי וקא גרסי,

קשיא להו שמעתא.

אמר ליה רבי שמעון לבר קפרא:

דבר זה צריך רבי.

אמר ליה בר קפרא לרבי שמעון:

ומה רבי אומר בדבר זה?

אזל אמר ליה לאבוא.

אי קפד.

אתא בר קפרא לאיתחזוי ליה, אמר ליה:

בר קפרא, איני מכירך מעולם.

ידע דנקט מילתא בדעתיה,

נהג נזיפותא בנפשיה תלתין יומין.

Rabbi Shimon son of Rebbe and Bar Kappara were learning together.

They found something difficult.

Rabbi Shimon said to Bar Kappara:

This requires Rebbe.

Bar Kappara said to Rabbi Shimon:

What would Rebbe have to say about this?!

(Rabbi Shimon) went and told his father.

(Rebbe) was insulted.

When Bar Kappara came to see him, he said to him:

"Bar Kappara, I will never prefer you".

He knew that Rebbe had taken offense, so he acted as if excommunicated for thirty days.

2) Yerushalmi Moed Kattan 3:1:

ר' הוה מוקר לבר אלעשא.

א"ל בר קפרא:

כל עמא שאלין לרבי ואת לית את שאל ליה

א"ל

מה נישאול

א"ל

שאול

משמים נשקפה הומיה

בירכתי ביתה מפחדת כל בעלי כנפים [איוב כט ח]

ראוני נערים ונחבאו וישישים קמו עמדו הנס

יאמרו הו הו

והנלכד נלכד בעונו.

הפך ר' וחמתיה גחיר

אמר רבי:

איני מכירך זקן.

ידע דלית הוא מתמנייא ביומו.

Rebbe gave great respect to Bar El'asa.

Bar Kappara said to Bar El'asa:

"Everyone is asking Rebbe questions, and you have no questions!?"

Bar El'asa said to Bar Kappara:

What should we ask?

Bar Kappara said to him:

"Ask

{Elaborate riddle}."

Rebbe turned and saw (Bar Kappara) laughing.

Rebbe said:

"I will never prefer you as an elder."

Bar Kappara knew that he would not get semikhab in Rebbe's lifetime.

Neither of these stories fit with a reading in which Rebbe appreciates Bar Kappara's humor. Moreover, Alei Tamar reads the Yerushalmi as a deliberate attempt by Bar Kappara to get Ben El'asah to humiliate himself by asking a riddle when lomdus was expected. Netziv suggests that Rebbe originally refused to invite Bar Kappara to the wedding because he would insult Ben El'asa's Torah learning rather than appreciate his character and generosity.

Yet I have to admit that my reading does not explain at all why Rebbe's laughter is a disaster for the world, and why he nonetheless laughs at Bar Kappara's charade. I also need to say that very different versions of our story can be found in various midrashim, in which the lack of invitation is explicitly accidental, and there is no critique of conspicuous consumption. Your turn! Shabbat shalom!