

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(15)

**The Mule, the Mare, and the Sow**

Esther Rabbah 7:1



**Background to the Fable “The Mule, the Mare, and the Sow”**

**The Heifer and the Ox, by Aesop**

A Heifer saw an Ox hard at work harnessed to a plough, and tormented him with reflections on his unhappy fate in being compelled to labor. Shortly afterward, at the harvest home, the owner released the Ox from his yoke, but bound the Heifer with cords, and led her away to the altar to be slain in honor of the festival. The Ox saw what was being done, and said to the Heifer: "For this you were allowed to live in idleness, because you were presently to be sacrificed."

*The lives of the idle can best be spared.*

**?** Do you agree with the moral?

**?** How is this moral related to the economical crisis in America?

**Esther 3:1**

*1. After these events, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite and advanced him, and placed his seat above all the princes who were with him.*

**?** Are you familiar with the story of Esther?

**?** Can you see a relationship to Aesop's fable?

**The Calends**



The Calends (Latin Kalendae "the called", gen. plural -arum), correspond to the first days of each month of the Roman calendar. The Romans assigned these calends to the first day of the month, signifying the start of the new moon cycle.

**Marcelo Ferder's drawing**

**?** How does the sow look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing? What about the mare and the mule?

**The Mule, the Mare, and the Sow**

Esther Rabbah 7: 1

מדרש רבה אסתר פרשה ז סימן א

א אחר הדברים האלה גדל המלך אחשוורוש את המן בן המזתא וגו', זה שאמר הכתוב (תהלים ל"ז) כי רשעים יאבדו ואויבי ה' כיקר כרים שאין מפטמין אותן לטובתן אלא לטבחה, כך המן הרשע לא נתגדל אלא למפלתו, משל לאדם שהיתה לו סייחה וחמורה וחזירה והיה נותן לחזירה בלא מדה לחמורה ולסייחה במדה, אמרה סייחה לחמורה מה שוטה זה עושה אנו שאנו עושין מלאכתו של בעל הבית נותן לנו במדה ולחזירה שהיא בטלה שלא במדה, אמרה לה תבא השעה ואת רואה במפלתה שאין מאכילין אותה יותר לכבודה אלא לרעתה, כיון שבא קלנדס מיד נטלו לחזירה ונחרוה, התחילו נותנין שעורים לפני בתה של חמורה והיתה מנשבת בהן ולא אכלה, אמרה לה אמה בתי לא המאכל גורם אלא הבטלה גורמת, כך לפי שכתוב וישם את כסאו מעל כל השרים אשר אתו לפיכך ויתלו את המן.

A man had a mule, a mare and a sow. He gave the sow all it wanted to eat, but to the mule and the mare he gave just what they needed.

The mare said to the mule, "What is this fool doing? To us who work for him he gives just what we need to eat, but to the sow—who does nothing—he gives as much as she wants."

The mule said to the mare, "The time will come when you will see the sow's downfall, for he is not feeding her for her benefit, but for his." When the festival of the gentiles came (the first day of the month of the Roman calendar, usually celebrated as a feast day), they killed the sow and ate it.

Esther Rabbah 7: 1

Our fable from the author of the Midrash Esther Rabbah interprets the following verse: "After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all their princes that were with him" (Esther 3:1). The symbolism is clear: As the sow in our fable is fed excessively only to be killed later on, so Haman is praised above all his ministers only to be hanged in the end. As the sow eats and eats, unaware of the end that awaits her, Haman is praised more and more, receiving honors but never being satisfied.

## Analysis Questions

**?** What “big” theological question is the author of Esther Rabbah trying to address here?

**?** Can you relate personally to this fable?

**?** Can you see the pattern the fable is trying to describe playing a role in history?

## Jewish Answers to the “Big Question”

- **Maimonides’ Introduction to Chapter Helek**

I must speak now of the great fundamental principles of our faith. Know that the masters of Torah hold differing opinions concerning the good, which will come to a person as a result of fulfilling the commandments, which God commanded us through Moses, our Teacher. As a consequence of their different understanding of the problem, they also hold widely different opinions concerning the evil, which the transgressor suffers. So much confusion has invaded their opinions that it is almost impossible to find anyone whose opinion is uncontaminated by error.

One group thinks that the expected good is the Garden of Eden, a place in which one eats and drinks without any physical work or effort. They also believe that their houses are made of precious stones, beds of silk, rivers flow with wine and fragrant oils, and many other things of that sort. This group believes that the evil is the Gehinom, a place of raging fire, in which bodies are burned and agonies of all sorts are inflicted upon men. Their descriptions of these afflictions are told at great length. This group adduces proof for their opinions from the words of our sages and from passages in the Scripture whose literal meaning seems either wholly or largely compatible with what they say.

A second group asserts that the good for which we hope are the Days of the Messiah, in whose time all men will be angels, and all of them will live forever. They will be giants in stature and will grow in number and strength until they have occupied the entire world forever. The Messiah will, with the help of God, live forever. They also believe that in those days the earth will bring forth garments woven, bread baked, and many other impossible things. In this view, the evil is that a man may not be alive in those days and may not merit the privilege of seeing them. This group also adduces proof from many statements found in the writings of our sages and from Biblical verses whose literal meaning seems to agree either wholly or partly with what they say.

A third group holds that the good for which we hope is the resurrection of the dead. By this they mean that a man will live after his death and return to his family and dear ones to eat and drink and never die again. According to this opinion the evil is that a man may not live after his death among those who are resurrected. Here, too, proof is adduced from many sayings that are found in the words of the sages and from Biblical verses whose literal meaning seem to teach this, wholly or in part.

A fourth view holds that the goal of fulfilling the commandments is the achievement of bodily peace and mundane success like fertile lands, extensive possessions, many children, health, peace, and security. They also believe that there will be a Jewish king who will rule over those who oppressed us. The evil that

will overtake us if we deny the Torah is the opposite of these, as in our present exile. Those who hold this opinion likewise find support for their views in verses of Torah, particularly the curses, and from other passages in Scripture.

A fifth group—and a large one—combines the opinions of all the others. They assert that the ultimate hope is that the Messiah will come, that he will resurrect the dead, who will enter the Garden of Eden where they will eat and drink in perfect health forever.

However, concerning this strange world to come, you will rarely find anyone to whom it occurs to think about it seriously or to adopt it as a fundamental doctrine of our faith, or to inquire what it really means, whether the world to come is the ultimate good or whether some other possibility is. Nor does one often find persons who distinguish between the ultimate good itself and the means, which lead to the ultimate good. What everybody always wants to know, both the masses and the learned, is how the dead will arise. They want to know whether they will be naked or clothed, whether they will rise in the same shrouds with which they were buried, with the same embroidery, style, and beauty of sewing, or in a plain garment which just covers their bodies. Or they ask whether, when the Messiah comes, there will still be rich men and poor men, weak men and strong men, and other similar questions.

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The Eleventh Fundamental Principle is that God rewards those who perform the commandments of the Torah and punishes those who transgress its admonitions. The greatest reward is the world to come; the worst punishment is extinction. We have already made this sufficiently clear. The Scripture which teaches this fundamental principle is "If you will not forgive their sin, extinguish me." To which God replied, "I will expunge from My book only the man who has sinned against Me" (Ex. 32:32 ff.). This proves He knows both the obedient and the sinner, and rewards or punishes each.

- **Avot 3:20**

Rabbi Akiva used to say: All is given against a pledge, and the net is cast over all living; the shop stands open and the shopkeeper gives credit and the account book lies open and the hand writes. Every one that wishes to borrow let him come and borrow; but the collectors go their daily rounds and exact payment from man with or without his consent; for the collectors have that on which they can rely; and the judgment is a judgment of truth; and all is made ready for a feast.

- **Avot 4: 19**

Rabbi Yannai used to say: It is not in our power to explain the well-being of the wicked or the sorrows of the righteous.

## Wrapping Up



! And the answer to our question is...

## Bibliography

Aesop: [The Complete Fables](#). Penguin Classics – 1998  
Artsroll Youth Megillah. Mesorah Publications - 1988  
Esther Rabbah, in [Midrash Rabbah](#). Soncino – 1983  
[The Rambam's Introduction to Chelek](#). Moznaim Publishing - 1994  
[Artsroll Youth Pirkei Avot](#). Mesorah Publications

## Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

### K-3rd GRADES:

1)

Why was the mare upset about the way the man treated the sow?

2)

At the end of the story we find out why the sow was getting so much food. What was the reason and what happened to the sow?

3)

When have you ever felt jealous like the mare about something or somebody else? What did you do about it? Jealousy is a powerful feeling that can ruin relationships between people and even stop them from doing good things altogether. Read the story of Joseph and his brothers and discuss this.

### 4th-6th GRADES:

1)

How do each of the characters in the story reflect their feelings and their thoughts in the illustration?

2)

Do you think the mare and the mule should have warned the sow of what was going to happen to him? What do you think the sow would have done or said if they did?

3)

What does this story teach us about the saying "The grass is always greener on the other side"? Which is the "other side" in this case?

4)

Give an example of your desire to have something or be like someone else until you learned some other truth about this thing or this person that changed your mind.

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### 7th –12 GRADES:

1)

The sow seems to be a victim of its own excess and of its owner's plans. How is indulgence in eating, drinking, and sex viewed in Jewish law and why? What about excesses in prayer, abstinence, study or work—how are these viewed? What can you conclude, then?

2)

What other Biblical narratives deal with issues of jealousy? What happens there? Is there a similar or different theme in comparing this fable with the other Biblical narratives?

3)

In using this midrash to apply to the life of Haman, what do you understand that our Sages were trying to teach us, both about Haman and about human beings?

## Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

### Pre-Reading Vocabulary Exercise: Knowledge Rating

(Allen, K. and M. Miller. Literacy and Learning in the Content Areas. N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.)

The teacher gives the students a list of words they will encounter in the text they will be reading. Students study the list and mark the appropriate box: can define, have seen/heard, ??.

- "Can define" means that the students know the word
- "Have seen/heard" means that the students have some but limited awareness of the word

- “??” means that the students do not know the word at all

A class discussion should follow with the teacher leading students to talk about words they know and why they know them, words they’ve seen or heard and why, and then talk about the words about which they have no knowledge whatsoever. From “The Mule, the Mare and the Sow” enter the following words in a chart:

	<b>Can Define</b>	<b>Have Seen/Heard</b>	<b>???</b>
<b>Mule</b>			
<b>Mare</b>			
<b>Sow</b>			

For discussion sake, other possibilities include asking students to come up with synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms. Another column could be added to the chart.

An additional column could also be added to the chart to encourage students to draw a picture or a symbol of what the word means or what it might mean.

	<b>Can Define</b>	<b>Have Seen/Heard</b>	<b>???</b>	<b>Drawing</b>
<b>Mule</b>				
<b>Mare</b>				
<b>Sow</b>				