

Fables from the Jewish Tradition

By Rabbi Manes Kogan

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The Blind Man and the Torch Babylonian Talmud Megillah 24b



Background to the Fable “The Blind Man and the Torch”

Rabbi Yose ben Halafta



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose_ben_Halafta

Rabbi Jose ben Halafta or Yose ben Halafta was a Tanna of the fourth generation (2nd century CE). Jose was a student of Rabbi Akiba and was regarded as one of the foremost scholars of halakha and aggadah of his day. He was a teacher and mentor to, among other notables, Judah ha-Nasi and thus is prominently mentioned in the Mishnah. Of the many Rabbi Yose's in the Talmud, Yose Ben Halafta is the one who is simply referred to as Rabbi Yose.

The “Tochacha” – Admonitions and Punishments

www.torah.org/learning/parsha/summary/kisavo.html

Commonly known as the Tochacha the admonitions and punishments. It describes the consequences that will befall the Jewish people if they ignore Hashem's Torah and his providence. The custom is for the Reader to read this Aliya more quickly and quietly than the rest of the Parsha.

Here are two definitions of the word “admonition”

- Cautionary advice about something imminent (especially imminent danger or other unpleasantness); “a letter of admonition about the dangers of ...
- A firm rebuke

? Can you think of cases of admonition in our daily lives?

? Do you think admonitions work?

29. You will grope at midday, as the blind man gropes in the dark, and you will be unsuccessful in your ways. You will be only oppressed and robbed all the days, and no one will save [you].

? Do you see anything in this verse that calls for explanation?

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מגילה דף כדב.

אמר רבי יוסי: כל ימי הייתי מצטער על מקרא זה (דברים כ"ח) והיית ממשש בצהרים כאשר ימשש העור באפלה, וכי מה אכפת ליה לעור בין אפילה לאורה? עד שבא מעשה לידי. פעם אחת הייתי מהלך באישון לילה ואפלה, וראיתי סומא שהיה מהלך בדרך ואבוקה בידו. אמרתי לו: בני, אבוקה זו למה לך? - אמר לי: כל זמן שאבוקה בידי - בני אדם רואין אותי, ומצילין אותי מן הפחתין ומן הקוצין ומן הברקנין.

Once, in the dark of night, I saw a blind man walking with a torch in his hand. I asked, "My son, what good is a torch to you?"

He answered, "As long as I have the torch in my hand, people will see me and save me from pits, thorns, and briars."

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? Why was it strange to see a blind man carrying a torch?

? How did the blind man need other people to help him?

? What did the narrator wrongly assume when he first saw the blind man? What can we learn from this about the way we may often judge people at first sight?

Note on "The Blind Man and the Torch"

This fable is used by Rabbi Yossi to interpret a verse that at first glance seemed to him hard to explain: "You will grope at midday, as the blind man gropes in the dark" (Deuteronomy 28:29). Rabbi Yossi asks, "What does it matter to a blind man if he gropes in the darkness or not, if he cannot see?" Rabbi Yossi responds to this question with our fable, illustrating that a blind man who can walk during the day (or by the light of a torch) has more possibilities of being saved from the thorns of a pit than a blind man who walks in darkness (or deprived of a torch).

? What is the novelty in Rabbi Yossi's answer to his own question?

Wrapping Up 1: Changing the world, one torch at a time!

? Do you think it is important for people with disabilities today to let others know about their conditions? Why or why not?

? What would your life be like if you could not see? What kinds of help do you think you would need? What would be most difficult or frustrating for you? What might you become more aware of?

? What does this story tell us about how we need to think of people with disabilities? Do you think our society is doing enough to help those with physical, mental and emotional disabilities? Where do you think we could be doing a better job?

? If the blindness in this fable is only symbolic, what do you think the fable is about? What kinds of things are people often “blind” to in our world? What types of “torches” are needed and how do we go about creating or distributing these?

Wrapping Up 2: Finding Blessings in Curses: When the presence of the “other” makes all the difference in the world!

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

- 1)
Why was it strange to see a blind man carrying a torch?
- 2)
How did the blind man need other people to help him?
- 3)
What do blind people often carry today to help them and to let other people know they are blind?
- 4)
How are we supposed to treat people who are blind? (See the verse from Leviticus 19:14, “You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.”) How about people with other disabilities—those who are deaf, unable to speak, unable to walk, or unable to think as quickly as you, for example?

4th- 6th GRADES:

- 1)
What did the narrator wrongly assume when he first saw the blind man? What can we learn from this about the way we may often judge people at first sight?
- 2)
What was the blind man assuming would happen if he carried the torch? What is the meaning of the verse in Leviticus 19:14, “You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind”?
- 3)
Do you think it is important for people with disabilities today to let others know about their conditions? Why or why not?
- 4)
What would your life be like if you could not see? What kinds of help do you think you would need? What would be most difficult or frustrating for you? What might you become more aware of?

7th-12th GRADES:

- 1)

What does this story tell us about how we need to think of people with disabilities? Do you think our society is doing enough to help those with physical disabilities? Mental and emotional disabilities? Where do you think we could be doing a better job?

2)

If the blindness in this fable is only symbolic, what do you think the fable is about? What kinds of things are people often “blind” to in our world? What kind of “torches” are needed and how do we go about creating or distributing these?

3)

What do you think the Torah means when it says in Levit 19:14, “You shall not insult the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind”? Why are the blind often mentioned as a special category for those needing just treatment—like the widow, orphan, and stranger—in the Bible?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Post Reading Strategy: Intra Act Discussion Chart

(Hoffman, J.V. *Intra-Act: A Languaging in the Content Areas Teaching Procedure*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Missouri-Kansas City] Dissertation Abstracts International, 1977.)

Following a reading, students can be put into small groups and given a small task in preparation for discussion. In this case, students are given a chart with spaces for their names at the top of the columns. Along the left column are three statements. First, students put their own name at the top of the second column. Then, they put the names of the other members of their group at the top of the remaining columns. Next, they read each statement. Under the column with their name, they write an “A” for agree and a “D” for disagree. Under the columns with their group members names, they assume, predict, or guess how the group member might respond to that statement and they fill in either an “A” or a “D.” When all group members have finished filling in their charts, they have a discussion about the reactions they had and how well they predicted their group members would react to the statements.