

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(3)

The Two Wives
Babylonian Talmud Baba Kama 60b



Background to the Fable “The Two Wives”

The Middle-aged Man and His Mistresses, By Aesop

A middle-aged man who was going grey had two mistresses, one young and the other old. Now she who was advanced in years had a sense of shame at having sexual intercourse with a lover younger than herself. And so she did not fail, each time that he came to her house, to pull out all of his black hairs.

The young mistress, on her part, recoiled from the idea of having an old lover, and so she pulled out his white hairs.

Thus it happened that, plucked in turn by the one and then the other, he became bald.

That which is ill-matched always gets into difficulties.

NOTE: A hetaira was a 'female companion', a courtesan or concubine, as opposed to a legal wife. The English word 'mistress' does not adequately convey the full social meaning if we wish to be precise about ancient Greek society. Similarly, the man is described as a mesopolios, a form of mesaipolios, which means 'half-grey' but is also the word used by association to mean 'middle-aged' in Greek.

? Do you agree with Aesop's moral? Why? Why not?

? Why do you think the man in this story had two wives (or mistresses)?

Agada and Halacha

curiousjew.blogspot.com/2007/03/aggada-vs-halakha.html

Agada: from the Hebrew, Agada or Hagada. General designation for the non- halachic (non-legal) material that is found in the Talmud and the Midrash. The Agadic writers cover a wide range: biblical tales, fables, and folklore, anecdotes and biographical details that refer to the sages, moral teachings, medicine, philosophy and theology.

Halacha: Jewish law. This term denotes the legal part of the Talmud as well as its later codifications, in contrast with the Agada, which is narrative and not legal.

? Which one is closer to your heart, Agada or Halacha? Why?

The Torah as a Bride

Selection of Texts:

- Investiture of the Chassan Torah
- Allegorical Translation of Song of Songs
- Rashi on Exodus 31:18

The Two Wives Babylonian Talmud Baba Kama 60b

בבא קמא דף ס.ב

יתיב רב אמרי ורב אסי קמיה דר' יצחק נפחא, מר א"ל: לימא מר שמעתתא, ומר א"ל: לימא מר אגדתא, פתח למימר אגדתא ולא שביק מר, פתח למימר שמעתתא ולא שביק מר. אמר להם: אמשול לכם משל, למה הדבר דומה? לאדם שיש לו שתי נשים, אחת ילדה ואחת זקינה, ילדה מלקטת לו לבנות, זקינה מלקטת לו שחורות, נמצא קרח מכאן ומכאן אמר להן: אי הכי, אימא לכו מלתא דשוויא לתרוייכו:

A man had two wives; one was young and the other was old. The young one plucked out his gray hair, while the old one plucked out the black. In no time the man was bald.

Babylonian Talmud Baba Kama 60b

? Why do you think the young wife was plucking out the gray hairs?

? Why do you think the old wife was plucking out the black hairs?

? How do you think the two wives felt at the end when he was bald? How do you think the man felt?

? Why do you think the man in this story had two wives?

Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

? Look at the picture and describe what each person might be saying.

? How does the man look in the drawing? Does he look happy? Why not?

? If you were to write a caption under the picture, what would it say?

Note on “The Two Wives”

This fable, which appears in Aesop’s collections and in those of almost all of the previous fabulists, is dealt with by the Talmud in a totally different context: Rav Ami and Rav Asi were studying with Rabbi Yitzhak Napcha (the blacksmith), and while one of them asked the teacher to discuss a legal matter, the other insisted that he elaborate on a narrative (Aggadeta). When the teacher began to speak on one of the topics, the student who was not interested in that aspect of the rabbinical tradition interrupted him, and the same thing happened with the other student. Rabbi Yitzchak Napcha, probably upset about the attitude of his students which prevented them from learning, shared with them this fable, indicating that if they did not let him speak, they would go bald (of knowledge.) Finally, the teacher decided to teach them a lesson that contained both a legal aspect and a narrative.

? Our fable, as opposed to Aesop’s fable, doesn’t end with a moral. If you were to write a moral to our fable, what would it be?

Wrapping Up

Our fable has something to say about difficult choices. Let’s look at another text dealing with that theme:

Robert Frost: The Road Not Taken (1915)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

? Can you relate personally to this fable?

? How do you think this short fable relates to the work of a congregational rabbi, or the work of lay leaders in a Synagogue?

Bibliography

Aesop: The Complete Fables. Penguin Classics – 1998
The Sapirstein Edition: Rashi. - Shemot - Mesorah Publications – 1994
Shir haShirim, Song of Songs. The Artscroll Tanach Series, Mesorah Publications – 1977
The Complete Artscroll Machzor – Succos. Mesorah Publications – 1987
The Schotenstein Edition of the Talmud Bavli. Bava Kamma. Mesorah Publications – 2001

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

Why do you think the young wife was plucking out the gray hairs?

2)

Why do you think the old wife was plucking out the black hairs?

3)

How do you think the two wives felt at the end when he was bald? How do you think the man felt?

4)

Look at the picture and describe what each person might be saying.

4th- 6th GRADES:

5)

Why do you think the man let his wives pluck out his hair?

6)

If you were to write a caption under the picture, what would it say? (Who would you have speak?)

7)

Have you ever been in a situation where two opposite demands are made of you or you get two totally different messages from your parents or your friends? How did it make you feel? What did you do or say to resolve this?

8)

Compare this story with an ethical dilemma in the Bible, such as Jacob following his mother's request to pretend to be his brother Esau in order to receive Isaac's blessing (Gen. 27). What happened here, and what can we learn from such situations for our own lives?

7th- 12th GRADES:

1)

This story is definitely a "no-win" situation. How could this have possibly been changed into a "win-win" situation—or was that impossible?

2)

When have you been pulled in two different directions in your life? What did you do?

3)

Have you ever been in the middle of two people in a conflict, which may or may not have been about you? What options did you have? What did you do?

4)

The story comes from the context of the Talmud, which often contains opposing opinions, though at the end of a discussion, one is usually considered the majority opinion and one is included as the minority opinion. Why do you think the editors of the Talmud felt it was important to preserve these often diametrically opposed opinions and the discussions leading up to them?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh

Pre-Reading Drama Exercise: Invisible Objects Exercise

(Beach, R. and J. Marshall. *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School*. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace, 1991.)

- Sit on the floor in a circle. This makes everyone equal, like King Arthur's Round Table.
- Create an object through mime. Let it be very simple: looking through a telescope, putting on a ring, fishing, etc.
- Once you have created your object, demonstrate how to use it and pass it to your left. The next person "wears the ring" or "uses the fishing pole." They then change the object into something new and demonstrate how to use the new object. They pass it to the next person. Continue until everyone has had to create an object.
- Repeat the exercise.
- Finally, have two students pretend to pluck individual hairs from a third student's head.