

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(36)

**The Cedar and the Reed**  
Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 105b



**Background to the Fable "The Cedar and the Reed"**

**Cedars and Reeds**



**Biblical Verses**

*"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are troublesome"*  
(Proverbs 27:6)

**?** Why do you think according to the Book of Proverbs the wounds of a friend are faithful and the kisses of an enemy are troublesome?

*"For the Lord will smite Israel as a reed is shaken in the water..."* (1 Kings 14:15)

*"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! They extend like streams, like gardens by the river, like aloes which the Lord planted, like cedars by the water"* (Numbers 24:5-6)

**Ahijah of Shiloh**

When Solomon died, ten of the tribes seceded, and their religious leaders built local worship sites. At this time, Shiloh was probably revived as a holy shrine; it was home to Ahijah HaShiloni, who announced the secession of the ten tribes after Solomon died (1 Kings 14:6-16).

## Balaam

Balaam (Standard *Bilam*) is a diviner in the Torah, his story occurring towards the end of the Book of Numbers. Every ancient reference to Balaam considers him a non-Israelite, a prophet, and the *son of Beor*, though *Beor* is not so clearly identified. Though other sources describe the apparently positive blessings he delivers upon the Israelites, he is reviled as a "wicked man" in the major story concerning him. Balaam attempted to curse God's people. He failed all three tries, each time producing blessings, not curses (Numbers 22-24).

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#### סנהדרין דף קה.ב.

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: מאי דכתיב (משלי כ"ז) נאמנים פצעי אוהב ונעתרות נשיקות שונא - טובה קללה שקילל אחיה השילוני את ישראל, יותר מברכה שברכם בלעם הרשע. אחיה השילוני קילל את ישראל בקנה, שנאמר (מלכים א' י"ד) והכה ה' את ישראל כאשר ינוד הקנה במים וגו' מה קנה זה עומד במקום מים, וגזעו מחליף ושרשיו מרובין, ואפילו כל רוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזות אותו ממקומו, אלא הוא הולך ובא עמהן, כיון שדוממו הרוחות - עמד קנה במקומו. אבל בלעם הרשע ברכן בארז, מה ארז זה - אינו עומד במקום מים, ושרשיו מועטין ואין גזעו מחליף, אפילו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו - אין מזיזות אותו ממקומו, כיון שנשבה בו רוח דרומית - מיד עוקרתו והופכתו על פניו. ולא עוד אלא שזכה קנה ליטול ממנו קולמוס לכתוב ממנו ספרי תורה נביאים וכתובים.

The reed grows in water; its stems move and its roots are many. And even though all the winds in the world blow, they cannot uproot it, but only cause it to sway back and forth. When the winds finally die down, the reed is still in place.

The cedar (on the other hand) does not live near water, its roots are few, and its trunk does not sway. And even though strong winds blow, they cannot move it from its place. However, when a southerly wind blows, it uproots the cedar and overturns it.

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#### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** According to our fable, what are the positive characteristics of the cedar and the reed? What are their negative characteristics?

**?** Which one of the two (the cedar and the reed) do you think our fable favors? Why?

## Note on “The Cedar and the Reed”

Our fable is included in a text in which we again see how the midrashic process works.

The speaker starts with a rhetorical question about the meaning of a verse and is given an answer using other verses (which also acquire new meaning), often using a story, a fable, or a popular saying to illustrate the message it is attempting to convey.

The complete citation follows:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: What does the verse refer to when it says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are profuse” (Proverbs 27:6)? Better the curse that Achia of Shiloh made against Israel than the blessing that the wicked Balaam gave them. Achia of Shiloh cursed Israel, comparing it to a reed, as is said: “For the Lord will smite Israel as a reed is shaken in the water...” (I Kings 14:15), as the reed grows in the water, and its trunk moves and its roots are many, and when all the winds of the world come and blow, they cannot uproot it, only cause it to sway back and forth. And when the winds (finally) abate, the reed is still in place. But the wicked Balaam blessed the Children of Israel and compared them to a cedar. The cedar does not live near water, its roots remain few, and its trunk does not move from its place. However, when a southerly (i.e. strong) wind blows, it uproots the cedar and overturns it. The reed is not only superior to the cedar, but it was also so deserving that it was used to write the scrolls of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

## More Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** What were the “wounds of a friend” (the harsh words of Prophet Ahia towards Israel)? Why were they –according to our midrash- a blessing in disguise?

**?** What were the “troublesome kisses of an enemy” (the blessings of the wicked Balaam)? Why were they –according to our midrash- a curse in disguise?

**?** Why do you think was the reed chosen to write Torah scrolls?

## **!** Wrapping Up

Flexibility: a blessing in disguise!

## Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

### K-3rd GRADES:

1)

Why are the reeds so strong that even mighty winds can't blow them over?

2)

Why is it so strange that the winds could topple the cedars but not the reeds?

3)

What is something you own or you know of that has lasted a very long time? Why do you think it has lasted so long? What do you think helps people to be strong,

especially when they have hard things happening to them like sickness or money problems?

**4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> GRADES:**

1)

What would you say the meaning of this fable is?

2)

What are the “roots” or things that make people strong when difficult challenges face them? Tell about someone you know and admire who is strong.

3)

Do you consider yourself strong? What makes you strong? Describe a situation where you had your strength tested or when you first discovered you were strong.

**7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> GRADES:**

1)

What different messages could you derive from this fable?

How does a person reflect strength of character, and where does this come from? Give an example.

2)

When we read the fable in the context of the midrash, how do we get a different or additional meaning to the role of cedar vs. the reed? How does this then apply to the understanding of the verse from Proverbs 27:6? Can you give another example, either from the Bible or from Jewish history (ancient and modern), that illustrates this idea?

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

### **Post Reading Writing Strategy: RAFTT**

(Santa, C., L. Haven and S. Harrison. “Teaching Secondary Science through Reading, Writing, Studying, and Problem Solving.” In Lapp, D., J. Flood, and N. Farnan. Content Area Reading and Learning: Instructional Strategies. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989.)

RAFTT stands for Role, Audience, Format, Topic, and Tone. Instead of writing from the perspective of a student, the writer selects a new and different perspective. Instead of having the teacher as the typical audience, the writer selects a logical audience to the new and different perspective. The topic is often linked to the reading. The tone depends on all the other factors. For this fable, students can write from the perspective of the reed, the cedar, or the southerly wind. Who might the reed, for example, want to address? The children of Israel, perhaps. If so, what might the topic be? It might be about strength of character and position. The winds may blow, and the reed might sway back and forth, but when the winds abate, the reed remains in place. The tone then might be hopeful and courageous. Thus,

Role = reed

Audience = Children of Israel

Format = a song

Topic = strength of character and position of stability

Tone = hopeful and courageous