

Fables from the Jewish Tradition
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(4)

The Owner of the Hill and the Owner of the Ditch
Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a



Background to the Fable “The Owner of the Hill and the Owner of the Ditch”

Esther 3:8-11

8. And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from [those of] every people, and they do not keep the king's laws; it is [therefore] of no use for the king to let them be.

9. If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them, and I will weigh out ten thousand silver talents into the hands of those who perform the work, to bring [it] into the king's treasuries."

10. And the king took his ring off his hand and gave it to Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews.

11. And the king said to Haman, "The silver is given to you, and the people to do to them as it pleases you."

? Are you familiar with the story of Purim?

? What prompted Haman to offer the king ten thousand silver talents to bring into the king's treasuries?

? What calls for an explanation in the verses above?

? How do the Owner of the Hill and the Owner of the Ditch look in the drawing?

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מגילה דף יד.א.

משל דאחשורוש והמן למה הדבר דומה? לשני בני אדם, לאחד היה לו תל בתוך שדהו, ולאחד היה לו חריץ בתוך שדהו, בעל חריץ אמר: מי יתן לי תל זה בדמים בעל התל אמר: מי יתן לי חריץ זה בדמים לימים נזדווגו זה אצל זה, אמר לו בעל חריץ לבעל התל: מכור לי תילך - אמר לו: טול אותה בחנם, והלוא?

Once there were two men: one had a hill in the middle of his field and the other a ditch. The owner of the ditch thought, "Who will sell me a hill?" while the owner of the hill thought, "Who will sell me a ditch?"

One day the two met, and the owner of the ditch said to the owner of the hill, "Sell me your hill." Upon which the owner of the hill replied, "Take it!"

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Rabbi Abba applies this fable to Esther 3:11: "And the king said to Haman, 'The silver is given to you and the people to do to [the Jews] as it pleases you.'" Thus, he wants to teach us that Ahasuerus had as much interest in getting rid of the Jews as did Haman, only he could not find anyone to do the "dirty work." This is why, on hearing that Haman planned to kill all the Jews, not only did Ahasuerus respond affirmatively to his request, but he also permitted Haman to make use of the money that he had offered the king. Likewise, the owner of the ditch and the owner of the hill, according to Rabbi Abba, succeeded in meeting each other's needs well.

? What do you think is the moral of our fable?

? Can you think on any other time in Jewish history when the "partnership" describe in our fable took place?

? Coming back to the fable itself, how would you describe the relationship between the owner of the hill and the owner of the ditch? Can you describe similar relationships in our daily lives?

Wrapping Up

? When profit and convenience overcome ethics and moral standards

Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut

K-3rd GRADES:

1)

How did the two owners end up helping each other get just what they each wanted?

2)

Why do you think someone might want a hill on their property? Why might someone want a ditch?

3)

Did you ever trade with someone to get something you wanted and give them something they wanted? How did you feel when you did this? Do you ever look to see what someone else could use that you have or you could do for them—even if they don't have anything you could use?

4th-6th GRADES:

1)

Why didn't the owner of the hill ask the other owner to sell him his ditch? Why did he just say "Take it!"

2)

When it comes to helping others, to giving Tzedaka, Maimonides created a kind of ladder. Review this to see what the lowest and highest levels are, and then tell where you think the people in this story would fit on the ladder.

3)

Describe a time when you traded something with someone else. What considerations did you have in doing this? How did it work out for each of you?

4)

What kinds of things do you think people should be willing to trade that could help our world?

7th-12th GRADES:

1)

What seems a little absurd about this story? What do you think it tells us about human desires and their fulfillment?

2)

Do you think that these men each did a mitzvah? Why or why not?

3)

This story of fulfilling each other's needs through exchange of goods calls to mind the kibbutz system that for years dominated Israel's agricultural life. The kibbutz system in Israel was originally based on a communist system, where no money was exchanged but each member was given items, according to their needs, from what they had in turn contributed to the kibbutz in work. Everyone basically received the same clothes and the same kind of house and ate the same food. Everyone helped in determining how the kibbutz would be run—how the proceeds of their farming work would be sold and the profits used for everyone's benefit, etc. Childcare, laundry, cooking and cleaning were all shared jobs so that the workload was evenly distributed. What do you think of this system? What might be the pitfalls? What benefits would there be?

Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh**Post Reading Strategy: Book Link**

Book Linking is a discussion strategy. When students are reading a story, novel, poem, or essay, and another text is conceptually related, one way to have an in-depth discussion is to have the students read that additional text. Discussion then can take place about both texts, and similarities and differences can be included. This increases the understanding of both texts, but especially the original text under study.

"The Owner of the Hill and the Owner of the Ditch" could be linked to O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." In the Hill and Ditch fable, each owner wanted what he did not

have. In the Magi story, the wife sold her hair to make enough money to purchase a watch chain for her husband, and the husband sold his watch to make enough money to purchase a beautiful comb to hold up his wife's hair.

In the Note to this fable, Rabbi Abba contends that the two owners succeeded in meeting each other's needs well. In the Magi story just the opposite occurs. This could be the basis for a class discussion: How and why did one set meet each other's need; and the other accomplish the exact opposite?