

The Dream of Exile: A Rereading of Honi the Circle-Drawer

Hyim Shafner

IN RECENT DECADES THE REREADING OF TALMUDIC narratives, of *aggadah*, has uncovered a surprising plethora of modern and post-modern philosophical resonances. At first glance talmudic stories often seem to be merely that — slices of life from long ago. But if the Talmud is viewed as a closely edited book in which words and images are carefully chosen, the extra word used in such a story or the fantastic image chosen for portrayal can be deciphered to expose messages that go beyond the plain meaning of the text. These generally reveal deeper theological ideas and often psychological conflicts and philosophical conundrums which resonate in our own time; for in the end, humans and the central issues of their lives and their relationships to God and one another have changed little over the millennia.

Honi HaM'agel — Honi the Circle-Drawer — is a puzzling “rabbi” who appears only once in talmudic literature, in Tractate Ta’anit. Such an enigma can only demand “*Dorsheini!*” — examine and expound upon me. The following is a close reading of the unique story of Honi and his moment in the talmudic spotlight. An examination of the specific images and words that the Talmud employs will help to reveal the deeper Jewish, and I think universally human, messages which reside between the lines.

Rabbi Yohanan said: “This righteous man [Honi] was troubled throughout the whole of his life concerning the meaning of the verse, *A Song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.* [Honi asked] Is it possible for seventy years to be like a dream? How could anyone sleep for seventy years?”

One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw “that” man planting a carob tree. He asked, “How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?” The man replied: “Seventy years.” Honi then further asked him: “Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” The man replied: “I found [already grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted those for me so I too plant these for my children.”

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and Honi asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?” The man replied: “I am his grandson.” Thereupon Honi exclaimed: “It is clear that I have slept for seventy years.” He then caught sight of his ass which had given birth to several generations of mules, and he returned home. There he inquired, “Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?” The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.” Thereupon he said to them: “I am Honi the Circle-Drawer,” but no one would believe him.

He then repaired to the *beit ha-midrash* [study hall] and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer,” for whenever he came to the *beit ha-midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, “I am he!” But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for mercy, and he died. Raba said: “Hence the saying, ‘Either companionship or death.’” (B. TA’ANIT 23a)

The Talmud here presents us with a seemingly pedestrian story, but the way the Talmud sets up the narrative seems to be a response to Honi’s painful, lifelong conflict with the psalmist’s vision of the exile and redemption of the Jewish people — not a small matter at all. Our undertaking will be to understand the story and in the process decipher its enigmatic turns of phrase and uniquely depicted images to uncover the Talmud’s deeper theological messages hidden in the narrative.

Honi's Discord

The Talmud introduces Honi by telling us he was perplexed his entire life by the first verse of Psalm 126, *A Song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers*. The Aramaic word used here to describe Honi's emotional state is *mitzta'er*, pained. Why is Honi, clearly a wise man, and according to the Talmud, more capable of bringing rain than any other rabbi of his time, so pained by this verse? Why, specifically, by the implication that a person could sleep for seventy years? And why is this the way in which the Talmud sums up *the* theme of Honi's life? The Talmud, or Honi, seems to be deliberately misreading the verse in Psalm 126. Clearly the psalm is referring not to an individual sleeping or dreaming for seventy years, but to the nation of Israel likened to dreamers when they were returned to Zion after the seventy years of the Babylonian exile.

If Honi's question is metaphoric — sleep equaling exile — his deep perplexity and pain are still no easier to comprehend. The source of his bewilderment seems not to be the torment of exile itself but something seemingly far more mundane — the notion of its length and similarity to actual sleep, as he states: “Is it possible for seventy years to be like a dream? How could anyone sleep for seventy years?”

The Value of Exile

The Talmud's answer to Honi's question begins with a journey. His question cannot be answered in the Talmud's standard dialectical manner because it is not based on faulty logic or missing information. Honi asks about the ability of a people to hold onto its dream through an entire exile. He wonders how it is at all possible for the Jewish people, or anyone, to keep dreaming for seventy years without seeing that dream realized. How can one weather such a state for seventy years?

Honi's question is not a merely factual or logical question but one which emerges from the way in which he sees the world and experiences his life and the life of his people. Accordingly, it must be answered not through reason or added knowledge but through Honi's personal experience. To explore and perhaps answer such a question must involve an internal process whereby Honi's view changes because the question itself ceases to exist,

because he himself and the way he sees the world have been altered, in this case through a journey. That the story happens on a journey is not merely incidental, but integral to it; Honi must go on a hopefully life changing journey. Journeys are a process toward, not an end in themselves, much like the growth of a tree. This is the lesson meant for Honi — that the journey, like exile itself, is *something*, a valuable something, not just an insignificant prerequisite for a desired end.

The journey, like exile itself, is *something*,
a valuable something,
not just an insignificant prerequisite for a desired end.

The first thing Honi sees on his journey is “that man” planting a carob tree. The man remains nameless. “That man” is not someone important or even a specific character but he is called a *gavra*, implying that though he was not necessarily a scholar, he was a mature, upstanding man.

“Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?” Honi cannot imagine why the man is going to plant a tree whose fruit he will not eat. For Honi, eating the fruit is the point of planting a tree. Without this end in sight, the planting becomes absurd. Learning from the man that dreaming for seventy years is not only possible but productive will be Honi’s challenge.

The planter of the carob tree is essentially a dreamer. Through planting he dreams of the future though he will not see its actualization. Only after seventy years will the dream of the fruit become realized. The lesson for Honi is that as it is with carobs, so too with the Jewish people; the fruit of redemption can ripen only on the vine of exile. Exile is a long sleep, an entire lifetime.

The Jewish exile of seventy years is so long that a new generation, born in exile and knowing nothing else, will come to be. For them to imagine something different than exile while still living in it takes dreaming. The man’s answer is that he is not planting for himself but for the future. Preparing for the future is worthwhile in and of itself, he tells Honi. Without preparation there can be no fruition. Without exile, no redemption.

Rage Against the Night

This is a difficult lesson for Honi to grasp and he has no response for the man. His only reaction is to stop journeying.

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and Honi asked him, “Are you the man who planted the tree?” The man replied: “I am his grandson.” Thereupon Honi exclaimed: “It is clear that I have slept for seventy years.” He then caught sight of his ass that had given birth to several generations of mules; and he returned home.

Even after the lesson from the carob tree planter, Honi cannot fathom the role of the dream state of exile. Honi attempts to pass over this planting, this exile, and go directly to the carob fruit, to the way things ought to be, seventy years later. In Honi’s view there will be no waiting and watching this tree grow, he will cut to the chase and skip to the fruit. But in so doing Honi must skip over

Even if it were possible to eliminate exile
and jump to the time of redemption,
the price he must pay is the sacrifice of himself.

seventy years, his whole lifetime. Honi wakes exactly seventy years later to find that indeed he has arrived; one *can* sleep for seventy years and wake to find the fruit! He has passed over the tree’s exile and woken in its redemptive state, under the tree’s fully formed fruit, his world view vindicated — but not for long. When he returned home,

There he inquired, “Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?” The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.” Thereupon he said to them, “I am Honi the Circle-Drawer,” but no one would believe him.

Honi discovers that even if it were possible to eliminate exile and jump to the time of redemption, the price he must pay is the sacrifice of himself, of his own lifetime. One cannot go to a different time and still be oneself. We must be who we are, suggests this story in the Talmud, we each have our role in the

universe. Whether to plant or to reap, to dream or to wake, to be in exile or to be redeemed, it is of no matter; one state is not less valuable than another, and both are interdependent. Being satisfied where one is, even if that means living in a state of unredeemed expectation, is as worthwhile as being redeemed, at least according to the carob tree planter.

He then repaired to the *beit ha-midrash* and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer,” for whenever he came to the *bet ha-midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, “I am he!” But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for mercy, and he died. Raba said: “Hence the saying, ‘Either companionship or death.’”

Why did the scholars not ask Honi for the answers to their questions? Why did they not determine who he was and accept him? Was he not as wise and learned now as he had been before?

Perhaps not, suggests the Talmud, as he had no way to incorporate or take into account the accumulated knowledge, reasoning, and experience of the previous seventy years. What each of us contributes to the universe is not just the sum of what we have to offer but a unique structure only we can bring to a certain time, place, and state of the world. We are not just the substance of our knowledge, emotion, and personality, but a specific form, woven into a certain historical time, generation, and *zeitgeist*. Seventy years later there was no place for this *tzaddik* (righteous person), not in his own family and not in the *beit ha-midrash*. Though he was the illuminator of his generation, only in his ordained time could he be who he was. Although he might have been able to convince them of his actual identity, he could only be Honi, he could only light the way for his own generation and not for any other.

There is another prominent figure in Jewish history who was similar to Honi in this respect. A figure who after faithfully leading his generation desired with all his heart to cross over into a redemptive state that was not ordained to be his.

Honi and Moses

When Honi sleeps his seventy year sleep through the tree's growth, the Talmud tells us a very strange detail. "As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years." Why does the Talmud tell us this seemingly extraneous detail? I think the Talmud here hints at another dreamer — our greatest, though ultimately unfulfilled dreamer, who also gets covered in a rocky formation — Moses.

Moses too has a moment in which he wishes to be in the ultimate redeemed state, to fully know the Infinite Divine. God responds to Moses that he cannot, since "no one can see My face and live." Such a redeemed state is impossible until the exilic journey of this world is successfully traversed and we are no longer alive. God continues, *And it shall come to pass, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by. And I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen* (EXODUS 33:22-23). Moses does not get his wish; he must remain a limited human in this world of exile from the Divine, and on this journey the cleft of the rock is what hides him from his longed-for redemptive moment. The cleft of the rock symbolizes, for Moses as well as Honi, the journey itself, the impossibility of being in the destination sooner.

Moses taught our people to dream, to see the state of exile in the desert as a productive time, but at the end of the journey, he was not allowed to realize the great dream into reality. Moses could only be the leader in exile. He dedicated his life to the preparation and to the planting, but ultimately was not permitted to reap its fruit and see the redemption in the land of Israel.

Moses knew that there is an *avodah* — a holy service — unique to the desert exile and that this exile must precede redemption. Nevertheless, he desired with all his heart to lead the people into the Land of Israel. According to the midrash, Moses presented God with one argument after another to enter the land, resorting to one trick after another, only to be refused by God.

The comparison between Honi and Moses goes even further. When Moses' prayer is not answered, he too, like Honi, draws circles in protest to God.

When, however, Moses saw that the decree against him (to enter the Land of Israel) had been sealed, he began to fast, and drew a small circle and stood therein, and exclaimed: 'I will not move from here until You annul your decree.' (DEUTERONOMY RABBAH 11:10)

Moses, like Honi, is a man of redemption never satisfied with the state of exile. Moses beats his fists upon the doors of redemption, drawing a circle and demanding of God. But perhaps it is precisely this dissatisfaction with exile that made both Honi and Moses the great leaders they were.

Like a Child Before God

What is it about Honi that makes it so hard for him to fathom exile? Why is he the one who must be shown the lesson of the carob tree? To answer this we must turn to the beginning of our story about Honi the Circle-Drawer — the story that accounts for his unusual name. Immediately preceding the carob tree section of the story, we learn:

Once it happened that the greater part of the month of Adar had gone and yet no rain had fallen. The people sent a message to Honi the Circle-Drawer, “Pray that rain may fall.” He prayed and no rain fell. He thereupon drew a circle, stood within it...and declared, “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me since I am like a son in Your household. I swear by Your great name that I will not move from this circle until You have mercy upon Your children!”

Rain began to drip and Honi exclaimed: “It is not for this that I have prayed, but for heavier rains to fill cisterns, ditches and caves.” The rain then began to come down with great force. Thereupon Honi exclaimed, “It is not for this either that I have prayed, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and bounty.” Then rain fell normally until the Israelites were compelled to [seek shelter] because of the rain. His disciples said to him, “Master, in the same way that you have prayed for the rain to fall, pray for the rain to cease.”

[Honi prayed and brought a thanksgiving offering.] Immediately the wind began to blow and the clouds were dispersed and the sun shone and the people went out into the fields and gathered for themselves mushrooms and truffles. Thereupon Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach sent this message to Honi, “Were it not that you are Honi I would have placed you under excommunication...but what shall I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent and He

grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires. He says to him, Father, take me to bathe in warm water, wash me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates, and he gives them unto him. Of you Scripture says, *Let your father and your mother be glad, and let she that bore you rejoice.* (PROVERBS 23:25)

The Sanhedrin sent Honi the Circle-Drawer an interpretation of the following verse, *You will decree and it will be fulfilled, and light will shine upon your affairs.* (JOB 22:28) ‘*You will decree*’ — You [Honi] have decreed [on earth] below and the Holy One, Blessed be He, fulfills your word [in heaven] above. ‘*And light will shine upon your affairs*’ — You have illumined with your prayer a generation in darkness. (B. TA’ANIT 23a)

Part of Honi’s inability to comprehend the preparatory exilic state is that he is beyond it. In exile the Divine is mostly hidden and so we do not see our prayers immediately answered. But for Honi, there is immediate gratification. For him God is not in hiding, He is revealed to Honi and close to him like a parent. Honi is not bound by the limitations of the veiled physical universe. Though this Divine awareness is the source of his greatness, it also prevents him from relating to its opposite, exile — our people’s exile, its value and necessity. Honi’s despair in the face of exile/planting/dreaming results from his inability to fathom, and therefore experience, distance from the Divine.

One of Honi’s special qualities, according to the rabbis in the Talmud, was that his prayers illumined the darkness of his generation. Honi is able to connect people, even other rabbis, directly to the Divine, “as a son...before his father.” Indeed this theme of light continues as the Rabbis remarked, “It is as clear (lit., bright or lighted) to us as when Honi the Circle-Drawer was alive.”

What was it about Honi, so different from his rabbinic colleagues, that allowed him to relate directly to the Divine? Perhaps it was his other unique characteristic that we see in the story: his childlike quality. Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach wonders, “But what shall I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent and He grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires; thus he says to him, Father, take me to bathe in warm water, wash me in cold water, give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates and he gives them unto him.”

Honi even refers to *himself* as a child: “He exclaimed, Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me in that I am like a son/child in Your household.” Honi’s circle drawing and insistence that God answer him immediately are also childlike actions. There is no formality between Honi and God since he is “like a son before the Divine.”

Perhaps because Honi approaches God as his parent,
God treats him, in return, like His child.

Honi demands rain and is answered, but God sends the wrong kind of rain. Honi asks a second time and once again God sends the wrong rain until at last Honi is specific. It is almost as if God is playing a game with Honi. He cannot refuse him, His son, so he plays a little game to remind Honi who is who. Perhaps because Honi approaches God as his parent (and not as his King), God treats him, in return, like His child.

But if Honi, who is like a child to the Divine, has God’s ear, why doesn’t God answer Honi when he prays? What is it about Honi’s seemingly childish circle sitting that impels an omnipotent God to give in to his people more so than prayer? Surely God does not feel ‘forced’ by Honi’s tantrum-like behavior?

I think the answer is that adult prayer has its limitations. It is more of a level-headed conversation with God, a formal beseeching, often in community. Honi’s uniqueness is manifest in his intimate child-parent relationship with God. Strangely Honi is closest to God and God hears him most clearly not when he prays, but when he draws a circle and insists that he is not leaving until God does what he wants.

Honi’s actions are a different way of relating to God, like a child’s immediate insistence. His strange circle drawing is only appropriate to, and possible in, a context of the child-parent relationship, one in which no introduction or formal dialogue is required. Ironically perhaps, demands are sometimes the language of love in that they suggest preconditions of intimate familiarity and devotion.

The Big Picture of Exile

Exile is akin to a state of suspended animation, a state of being that is less than real, less than perfect. In a sense, the defining point of exile is that it looks ahead to a different time, a more redeemed time. That is what makes it exile. The redemptive state is the state that needs for naught, that requires no referent. In redemption one has reached the goal. But exile is the state of wanting, of constant desire.

When dreaming in exile one does not dream of what is but of an other time, of what is yet to be. Dreaming harbors unlimited potential which reality does not. I can dream of what might be, of the way things ought to be. It is the act of dreaming that brings the possibility of a greater future into consciousness. In some sense, then, exile is also greater than redemption. For only in exile may one dream of redemption.

The child in Honi says that perfection must be right now! How is it possible for a whole people to live in a state of exile for seventy years, only dreaming? How can they keep the dream alive for seventy years? Who wants to live in a state of desire for something else? Wouldn't it be better to skip directly to redemption?

Honi's answer comes specifically from someone the Talmud calls a *gavra* — a mature man — because Honi's inability to see emerges from his state of childlikeness. It is a great irony that Honi's childlikeness lets him see through the veils which hide the Divine, but it also prevents him from seeing what grownups can see — the long term. It prevents him from finding the value in that which is not perfect. It inhibits him from appreciating exile for what it can offer in the present.

The child lives in a state of redemption, the adult in a state of exile. The exile of adulthood is an exile from many things — the primordial garden, one's youth, life eternal, purity and sinlessness — and an exile from always having what one wants (direct access to the redemptive/to the parent/to God). Honi cannot bear this, and so he cannot clearly see the value which comes with the sacrifice of being separated from God, from being grownup. But grow up we must. It is the way God made the world since the sin of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Children grow, peoples are exiled, and all must ultimately return to the dust from which we came.

Superficially at least, Honi's demise is sad and without purpose. But upon deeper examination his protest against exile, for which he sacrifices his very life, is an inevitable outcome of that which makes him great. In the end, Honi's ability to demand and produce rain when no one else could helps to quench the thirst of a despondent people.



HYIM SHAFNER, MSW, is Rabbi of Bais Abraham Congregation, an Orthodox community in St. Louis, Missouri. Prior to Bais Abraham he served as Rabbi of the St. Louis Hillel at Washington University and as the Rabbi of India for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Rabbi Shafner is the author of *The Everything Jewish Wedding Book* and a weekly blogger on Morethodoxy.org. He and his wife Sara Winkelman and their children live in University City, Missouri.