

# Why Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba Complained of Rabbi Abbahu

*James Toupin*

*Rabbi Abbahu and Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba came to a place; Rabbi Abbahu lectured on aggadah while Rabbi Hiyya lectured on halakhah. All the people left Rabbi Hiyya and went to hear Rabbi Abbahu; Rabbi Hiyya became upset. To comfort him, Rabbi Abbahu said: Let me give you a parable — what is the matter like? It's as if two men came to town, one selling precious stones and the other selling tinsel. To whom will people run? Don't they run to the one who sells the tinsel? [Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 40a]*

One sees his point:

The town wasn't big enough for the two of them.

Had he come for nothing, to the people of this small place?

His learning was the mortar meant to serve them.

It could build for them ramparts  
that need not be measured in cubits,  
that would not yield to siege.

But he knew there could be nothing more enthralling  
than this new man, this rabbi, he called himself,

who was not one, but myriads,  
driving his herd of legends, multiplying event,  
as though problems to solve

did not sprout sufficiently already.  
This Abbahu turned word  
and world upside down,

deriving law from legend  
instead of building  
life from law. And the people

flocked to him. Surely the eternity  
of *ought* would be trampled down  
under the never of *might have been*.

That knowledge of the Lord  
that is only expressed in action  
would be consumed in the faith that invents.

As for the showdown: Rabbi Hiyya  
lives, and one can make out his quandary,  
because he is a character in a legend.

Through the legend, like a stranger  
emerging from unknown expanses,  
appears the life I fail to lead.

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