

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.

JAMES TOUPIN is a retired government lawyer, formerly general counsel of the Patent and Trademark Office, who lives in Washington, D.C. Since he began publishing poetry in 2008, his work has appeared in numerous print and online journals, most recently including The Turtle Quarterly, Raven Chronicles, Halfway Down the Stairs, and Umbrella. He is also a published translator of Selected Letters of Alexis de Tocqueville (University of California Press, 1985).