

BUT YOU, R' ELAZAR BEN ARACH, ARE ONE WHO BOTH EXPOUNDS WELL AND PRACTICES WELL.<sup>[11]</sup> אֲשֶׁרֶיךָ אֲבָרְכֶם אֲבִינוּ — HOW FORTUNATE ARE YOU, OUR FOREFATHER ABRAHAM, THAT R' ELAZAR BEN ARACH EMERGED FROM YOUR LOINS!" — וְכִשְׁאַמְרוּ הַדְּבָרִים לִפְנֵי רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ — AND WHEN THESE MATTERS WERE RELATED BEFORE R' YEHOSHUA, HE AND R' YOSE THE KOHEN WERE WALKING ALONG THE ROAD.<sup>[12]</sup> אָמְרוּ — THEY, who were also disciples of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai,<sup>[13]</sup> SAID to each other, "LET US ALSO EXPOUND UPON MAASEH MERKAVAH." — פָּתַח רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַדַּרְשׁ — R' YEHOSHUA BEGAN his discourse AND EXPOUNDED. וְאוֹתוֹ הָיוּם — NOW, THAT DAY WAS IN THE summer TAMMUZ SEASON, a season that does not usually have any cloudy days. Nevertheless, נִתְקַשְׁרוּ שָׁמַיִם בְּעָבִים וְנִרְאָה בְּמִין קֶשֶׁת בְּעָנָן — THE SKIES THICKENED WITH CLOUDS, AND SOMETHING LIKE A RAINBOW APPEARED AMIDST THE CLOUDS.<sup>[14]</sup> וְהָיוּ מְלַאכֵי הַשָּׁרָת מִתְקַבְּצִין — AND MINISTERING ANGELS WERE GATHERING AND COMING TO HEAR the teachings of *Maaseh Merkavah* — לִכְמוֹת אֲדָם — LIKE PEOPLE WHO GATHER AND COME TO SEE THE MERRYMAKING performed BEFORE A GROOM AND BRIDE. — אַחֲרָיִם רַבִּי יוֹסִי הִבְהִין — Afterwards, R' YOSE THE KOHEN WENT — וְסִפֵּר דְּבָרִים לִפְנֵי רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַבְּכַי — AND RELATED these MATTERS BEFORE RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI, — וְאָמַר — AND [RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI] SAID, — וְאָשֶׁרֶיכֶם — "HOW FORTUNATE ARE YOU! AND HOW FORTUNATE ARE THOSE WHO GAVE BIRTH TO YOU! — וְאֵשֶׁרֶי עֵינַי שֶׁרָאָו — HOW FORTUNATE ARE MY EYES THAT HAVE THUS SEEN! — וְאֵף אֲנִי — AND FURTHERMORE: I AND all of YOU WERE, IN MY DREAM, SEATED AT MOUNT SINAI.<sup>[15]</sup> — וְנִתְנָה — AND A HEAVENLY VOICE RESOUNDED TOWARDS US FROM HEAVEN saying, — עֲלוּ לְכָאן עֲלוּ לְכָאן — ASCEND HERE! ASCEND HERE! — מוֹצְעוֹת לְכֶם — LARGE DINING HALLS WITH ELEGANT COUCHES ARE PREPARED FOR YOU. — אֲתֶם וְתַלְמִידֵיכֶם וְתַלְמִידֵי תַלְמִידֵיכֶם מְזוּמְנִין — YOU, AND YOUR DISCIPLES, AND THE DISCIPLES OF YOUR DISCIPLES ARE all INVITED TO THE THIRD DIVISION."<sup>[16]</sup>

The Gemara challenges a detail in the Baraisa's story:  
**אֵינִי — Is it indeed so that R' Elazar ben Arach expounded upon**

*Maaseh Merkavah* before Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai? — **רַבִּי יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי — But it has been taught in a Baraisa:** — וְהָיָה אֲמַר — R' YOSE BAR R' YEHUDAH SAYS: — **שְׁלֹשָׁה הִרְצָאוֹת הֵן — THERE WERE THREE DISCOURSES** upon *Maaseh Merkavah*: — (1) R' YEHOSHUA DISCOURSED upon these MATTERS BEFORE RABBAN YOCHANAN BEN ZAKKAI; — (2) R' AKIVA DISCOURSED BEFORE R' YEHOSHUA; — (3) CHANANYA BEN CHACHINAI DISCOURSED BEFORE R' AKIVA. — **וְאֵילוּ רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָךְ לֹא קָא חֲשִׁיב — However, [the Baraisa] does not reckon R' Elazar ben Arach.** Thus, he must not have succeeded in expounding *Maaseh Merkavah*. — ? —

The Gemara answers:  
**דְּאֶרְצֵי וְאֶרְצוֹ קָמִיָּה קָחֲשִׁיב — [The Baraisa] reckons only [a sage] who discoursed before others and before whom others discoursed, — דְּאֶרְצֵי וְלֹא אֶרְצוֹ קָמִיָּה לֹא קָא חֲשִׁיב — but someone, such as R' Elazar ben Arach, who discoursed before others (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai) but others did not discourse before him, [the Baraisa] does not reckon.**

The Gemara asks:  
**וְהָא חֲשִׁיב בֶּן חֲשִׁיבֵי בֶן חֲשִׁיבֵי — But that rule does not account for Chananya ben Chachinai, before whom no one discoursed and nevertheless [the Baraisa] reckons him! — ? —**

The Gemara answers:  
**דְּאֶרְצֵי מִיָּהָא קָמִיָּה מֵאֵן דְּאֶרְצֵי — [Chananya ben Chachinai] was at least someone who discoursed before someone who had discoursed before someone else. That is, Chananya ben Chachinai is mentioned here only because of R' Akiva, to show that R' Akiva was someone who both discoursed before others (R' Yehoshua) and before whom others (Chananya ben Chachinai) discoursed. R' Elazar ben Arach, however, was not someone before whom others discoursed, nor did he discourse before one who has discoursed before other.**

The Gemara cites the story of four sages who attempted to delve into spiritual mysteries:<sup>[17]</sup>  
**אַרְבְּעָה נִכְנְסוּ — The Rabbis taught in a Baraisa:** — כְּפָרְדֵּס וְאֵילוּ הֵן — There were FOUR who ENTERED THE sublime ORCHARD,<sup>[18]</sup> AND THEY ARE [THE FOLLOWING:] — וְכָאן וְכָאן

NOTES

11. [In other fields of intellectual inquiry, it is possible to master the principles and details of a subject and yet live in complete contradiction to what he has learned. This is not true of *Maaseh Merkavah*. This subject may only be mastered in accordance with the purity of one's heart (see *Maharsha*).]  
 12. The Baraisa notes that both pairs of Sages (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and R' Elazar ben Arach; R' Yehoshua and R' Yose the Kohen) were on the road because *Maaseh Merkavah* may only be transmitted from one teacher to one student. Therefore, the Baraisa emphasizes that they were alone on the road, outside the earshot of anyone else (*Maharsha*).  
 13. *Ethics of the Fathers* 2:8.  
 14. Not a rainbow, which would be an untoward omen (see *Kesubos* 77b), but something like a rainbow, such as that seen in Ezekiel's vision (*Maharsha*).  
 15. At the Giving of the Torah, where every soul that would ever be born was present, and where every word of Torah that would ever be spoken was heard (*Maharsha*).  
 16. There are three divisions among those who engage in the study of the Torah: (a) those who fulfill the basic obligation to study the Torah, and who are content to learn its simple meaning; (b) those who have attained the Crown of the Torah are able to see its wonders, its guidance for life and its hidden light; (c) those who have mastered the secrets of *Maaseh Merkavah*. These three groups sit before the Divine Presence according to their stature, the highest being the last. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his disciples were invited to this third, highest circle

(*Sidduro shel Shabbos* 1:7:1, cited in *Yalkut Yeshayahu*). Cf. *Maharatz Chayes*.  
 17. The following Baraisa commences one of the best known and often quoted Aggadic teachings in the Talmud. It is the narrative of four Tannaim — some of the greatest Sages the Jewish nation has known — who embarked on a quest for esoteric enlightenment, with bitterly tragic results. Only one of these Sages was better for the experience, and even that one, the Gemara notes, narrowly escaped harm. There are many lessons to be drawn from these Aggados, which extend until 16a, as well as from the many details and interpretations offered by sources ranging from the *Yerushalmi* and the Geonim to latter-day Acharonim. We shall endeavor to present a selection of these in the coming pages.  
 18. The word פָּרְדֵּס, *pardeis*, means "orchard" literally, but here it is used in the same way that we speak of the Garden of Eden that is set aside for the reward of the righteous, i.e. a spiritual place [or level] in the heaven closest to God, where the souls of the righteous exist (see *Rabbeinu Chananel*).  
 [Accordingly, one could also translate this sentence: *There were four who entered Paradise*. Indeed, the English word "Paradise" derives from a Greek word meaning both orchard and Paradise which in turn derives from the Hebrew *pardeis*.]  
*Rashi* explains that the four Sages ascended to Heaven through the use of a Divine Name. *Tosafos* comment that they did not ascend literally, but rather it seemed to them as if they had done so. That is, their thoughts were entirely in Heaven, so they are described as being there. What these Sages were engaged in, of course, was an exalted level of

Handwritten notes in Hebrew, including the word "הב"ח" and various other annotations.



אָמַר וְרַבֵּי עֲקִיבָא – BEN AZZAI, BEN ZOMA,<sup>[19]</sup> ACHER<sup>[20]</sup> AND R' AKIVA.  
 אָמַר לָהֶם רַבֵּי עֲקִיבָא – Before they entered, R' AKIVA SAID TO  
 THEM, as a warning: כַּשְׂתֵּאתֶם מַגִּיעִין אֶצֶל אֲבְנֵי שֵׁשׁ טְהוֹר – WHEN  
 YOU REACH NEAR THE PURE MARBLE STONES,<sup>[21]</sup> מִיָּמִין – אל תאמרו, מימין  
 "DO NOT SAY, "There is WATER here, there is WATER here!  
 How can we continue further?"<sup>[22]</sup> דַּבֵּר שְׂקָרִים – משום שנאמר  
 "לֹא יִבְוֹן לְגַדְדָּא עֵינָי" – BECAUSE IT SAYS: A practitioner of deceit  
 shall not dwell within My house; A SPEAKER OF LIES SHALL NOT  
 ABIDE BEFORE MY EYES.<sup>[23]</sup> בֶּן עֲזַאי הֵצִיץ נֹמֵת – BEN AZZAI

GLANCED towards the Divine Presence AND consequently DIED.<sup>[24]</sup>  
 וְעָלָיו הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר – It is UPON HIM that THE VERSE STATES:  
 "יָקָר בְּעֵינֵי ה' הַמּוֹתָהּ לְחַסִּידָיו" – DIFFICULT IN THE EYES OF  
 HASHEM IS THE DEATH OF HIS DEVOUT ONES.<sup>[26]</sup> וְיִזְמַת הַצִּיץ  
 וְנִקְבַּע – BEN ZOMA GLANCED AND BECAME MENTALLY UNSTABLE.<sup>[27]</sup>  
 וְעָלָיו הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר – And it is UPON HIM that THE VERSE STATES:  
 "רִבֵּשׁ מִצֵּאתְךָ אֶכֶל דִּבְךָ פִּן־תִּשְׂבְּעֶנּוּ וְהִקְאִתוּ"  
 HONEY, EAT WHAT IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU, LEST YOU BE SATIATED  
 AND VOMIT IT UP.<sup>[29]</sup> אָחֵר קִיצַץ בְּנִטְעוֹת – ACHER CHOPPED DOWN

NOTES

*Maaseh Merkavah*, and that is the reason this incident is cited here (see *Rav Hai Gaon* cited in *HaKoseiv in Ein Yaakov* and in *Otzar HaGeonim*, *Teshuvos*; see also *Maharsha*). *Rav Hai Gaon* (loc. cit.) sketches the preparations they made to enter this state and attain this *Merkavah* perception. These preparations may be reasonably described, in contemporary terms, as a meditational technique used to isolate one's mind from the constant barrage of external stimuli and static. The mind is then able to reach an inner space wherein one may perceive the seven Heavenly chambers of a *Merkavah* vision. *Rav Hai Gaon* says further that the attainment of this perception is the subject of two Tannaic works: *Heichalos Rabbasi* and *Heichalos Zutrasi* [parts of which, at least, are extant]. In our versions of *Heichalos Rabbasi*, it seems that various Divine Names played a part in the entrance to a *Merkavah* state [i.e. they served as a contemplative focus]. Possibly, this is what *Rashi* means when he says that the four Sages ascended through the use of a Divine Name.

Although we find that in the Tannaic era Sages would enter a *Merkavah* state by means of Divine Names, this was no longer so in later generations. Rather, many Kabbalistic works prohibit this technique. The *Arizal* once explained the reason to his foremost disciple, *R' Chaim Vital*: One may make use of Divine Names only if one is in a state of absolute *taharah* (purity). During the era of the Amoraim, it became impossible to rid oneself of corpse contamination (which is very prevalent) because the purification procedure involving the ashes of a red cow could no longer be performed. Someone who is *tamei* by dint of corpse contamination is unsuited to use Divine Names and endangers himself by doing so (*Shaarei Kedushah* 3:6; *Shaar Ruach HaKodesh*, p. 41a).

19. Shimon ben Azzai and Shimon ben Zoma. They are known only by their fathers' names because they never received Rabbinical ordination (*Rashi* to *Kiddushin* 49b וְזוּמָא וְבִן עֲזַאי וְבִן עֲזַאי). However, we do find infrequently that they were called *R' Shimon ben Azzai* and *R' Shimon ben Zoma* (see e.g. *Yevamos* 49a; *Chullin* 83a).

20. This is a dishonorable reference to Elisha ben Avuyah, a Tanna who abandoned Torah observance, as the Gemara details below. Throughout this entire Aggadah he is called "Acher" (*Someone Else* or, *the Other*) except in the one place where the Gemara explains how he received this pseudonym. In the rest of the Babylonian Talmud, his name appears only one other time (*Moed Katan* 20a), and on that occasion he is cited to show that the halachah should not follow his view (see *R' Shlomo ben HaYasom* ad loc.). He is, however, mentioned in a favorable context in *Pirkei Avos* (4:19) and in *Avos DeRabbi Nassan* (ch. 24).

[In no place in the words of our Sages is he referred to as *R' Elisha ben Avuyah* (with the exception of a variant reading of one line in *Avos DeRabbi Nassan*). *Tashbetz* states that he never received ordination (*Magen Avos* to *Pirkei Avos* 4:19). Even if he had been ordained (as indicated by the variant reading in *Avos DeRabbi Nassan*) it is possible that the Sages stripped him of any Rabbinical titles after he went astray. (Such measures were rare, but did occur in Jewish history; for an example, see Responsa, *Mahari Weil* §147 towards the end.)]

21. These were stones that were built into [the walls of] the Heavenly chambers (see *Rabbeinu Chananel*). They were as brilliantly transparent as pure water (*Rashi*). Specifically the reference is to the sixth Heavenly chamber (*Rav Hai Gaon* loc. cit., citing *Heichalos*).

22. It seems as if there are a hundred thousand myriads of waves of waters; in reality there is not even one drop, only the pristine clarity of the "pure marble stones" (*Rav Hai Gaon* loc. cit., citing *Heichalos*; see also *Rabbeinu Chananel*).

23. *Psalms* 101:7. In the extant version of *Heichalos* (ch. 26), a person (near the *Merkavah* state) who refers to what he perceives as "water" is called "a descendant of the kissers of the [Golden] Calf" and is punished severely by angelic entities. [The sin of someone who refers to the stones of the supernal chambers as "water" seems to be that he confuses

metaphor with reality. The human mind must generally grasp abstract ideas through concrete metaphors. Although this is a necessity in the thoroughly abstract fields of *Maaseh Bereishis* and *Maaseh Merkavah*, one must never think that the spiritual worlds are actually composed of any physical material. All the spiritual universes are incapable of containing even one mustard seed (see *Zohar* II 197a). One who imputes corporeality to Heaven is similar to the worshipers of the Golden Calf, who wished to concretize God or His attributes.]

24. His soul became so enraptured by the supernal realities it experienced in the *Merkavah* state that it formed an intense connection with them. Ben Azzai's soul gazed at the brilliantly clear light and it separated from its body, as well as from all bodily functions. It chose the serenity of Heaven over the vicissitudes of our earth and never returned again (*Maharsha*, citing "an ancient book"; see also *Kuzari* 3:73). This is akin to a death by *death by kiss* [of God] (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51).

[According to an annotation in *Ein Yaakov*, the "ancient book" cited by *Maharsha* here (and elsewhere) is *Otzar HaKavod*, a Kabbalistic commentary on the Aggados of the Talmud. Its author was *R' Todros HaLevi Abulefia*, a nephew of the *Yad Ramah*.]

25. *Psalms* 116:15.

26. Ben Azzai was the paragon of saintliness (see *Berachos* 57b). His death was difficult before God, as it were, because Ben Azzai died young [with much unfulfilled potential]. However, there was no way that Ben Azzai could avoid death because the Torah states (*Exodus* 33:20): [God] said, "You will not be able to see My face, for no human can see My face and live" (*Rashi*). Ben Azzai endeavored to see God's face, as it were. That is, he persevered in gaining a clearer and truer perception of God until [he could no longer hold body and soul together and] he died (see *Rabbeinu Chananel*). When Ben Azzai died, the last of the diligent students of Torah disappeared (*Mishnah, Sotah* 49a).

27. Ben Zoma had not perfected himself as much as Ben Azzai in certain respects; when he too attempted to gaze at the brilliantly clear light, he was overcome with perceptions that were more than his mind could accommodate. As a result, the perceptions became mixed up and confusion reigned. He was akin to a person whose mind is disturbed and cannot comprehend ideas clearly (*Maharsha*, citing the "ancient book").

28. *Proverbs* 25:16.

29. *Anaf Yosef* cites *Mateh Moshe* who offers an interesting analogy on this topic: A king invited his subjects to a royal banquet and set before them bread, meat and wine to eat to their hearts' content, as well as honey and a variety of sweet delicacies for dessert. The fool among the subjects gorged himself on the desserts and avoided all the other foods, while the wise subjects ate the bread, meat and wine to satiety and only afterward tasted some of the sweet things. The fool stood up from the table still hungry for solid food and nauseous from the surfeit of sweetness; not long after, he regurgitated what he had consumed. The wise subjects left the meal content and happy.

The king is God; the subjects, the Jewish people; the royal banquet, the holy Torah; the bread, meat and wine are Talmud, halachic rulings and the Mishnah; and the sweet desserts are *Maaseh Bereishis* and *Maaseh Merkavah*. [*Mateh Moshe* offers Aggadic sources for all these parallels.] Foolish people spend all their time and mental energies on esoteric studies only, and leave behind the main teachings of the Torah. They remain hungry and thirsty for the Torah studies they have disregarded and will soon lose whatever they attained in esoteric enlightenment, as happened with Ben Zoma. The wiser persons first sate their hunger and quaff their thirst with the Mishnah, the Talmud and the halachic rulings, and only afterward taste of the sweetness of *Maaseh Bereishis* and *Maaseh Merkavah*. In this way, both disciplines remain with them.





יכול אני לבעול כמה בעילות בלא דם – I am capable of cohabiting many times with a virgin without rupturing the hymen and causing blood to flow from it.<sup>(1)</sup> If, then, the “virgin” is pregnant because she had relations while leaving her hymen intact, she is in fact not a virgin and she is prohibited to a Kohen Gadol.<sup>(2)</sup> או דלמא דשמואל לא שכיחא – Or perhaps the scenario described by Shmuel is uncommon, and the virgin’s pregnancy must be explained differently? אמר להו – [Ben Zoma] replied to them: דשמואל לא שכיחא – The scenario described by Shmuel is uncommon,<sup>(3)</sup> וחיישינן שמא באמבטי עיברה – rather, we may suspect that [the virgin] indeed had no relations but became pregnant by bathing in a bathtub in which semen had been deposited.<sup>(4)</sup>

The Gemara raises an objection: **But Shmuel has said:** כל שכבת זרע שאינו יורה – Any seminal emission that does not shoot like an arrow cannot fertilize.<sup>(5)</sup> – ? –

The Gemara resolves the objection: **Originally,** when the seminal emission was ejaculated into the bathtub water, it shot like an arrow as well.<sup>(6)</sup>

A story involving Ben Zoma: **The Rabbis taught in a Baraisa:** מעשה ברבי יהושע – AN INCIDENT occurred WITH R’ YEHOShUA BEN CHANAN-YAH – AS HE WAS STANDING UPON A STEP IN THE TEMPLE MOUNT. שקהיה עומד על גב מעלה בהר הבית – AS HE WAS STANDING UPON A STEP IN THE TEMPLE MOUNT. וראהו בן זומא ולא עמד – NOW, BEN ZOMA, who was much younger than R’ Yehoshua, SAW HIM there BUT DID NOT STAND UP BEFORE HIM as befit his dignity.<sup>(7)</sup> אמר לו – Noting this absent-minded behavior, [R’ YEHOShUA] SAID TO HIM: מאין ולאין בן זומא – WHERE ARE YOU

COMING FROM AND WHERE ARE YOU HEADED TO, BEN ZOMA?<sup>(8)</sup> צופה הייתי בין – [BEN ZOMA] REPLIED TO [R’ YEHOShUA]: מים העליונים למים התחתונים – I WAS SURVEYING THE SPACE BETWEEN THE UPPER WATERS AND THE LOWER WATERS<sup>(9)</sup> ואין בין – AND I discovered that THERE IS BETWEEN THEM where they join ONLY THREE FINGERSBREADTH,<sup>(10)</sup> ורוח אלהים מרחפת על-פני המים,, – AND THE BREATH OF GOD HOVERED UPON THE SURFACE OF THE WATERS. The word *hovered* indicates a separation of three fingersbreadth, LIKE A DOVE THAT HOVERS ABOVE HER YOUNG in the nest BUT DOES NOT quite TOUCH THEM.<sup>(12)</sup> אמר להו רבי יהושע לתלמידיו – Later, R’ YEHOShUA TOLD HIS DISCIPLES: עדיין בן זומא מבוחוץ – BEN ZOMA IS STILL ON THE OUTSIDE.<sup>(13)</sup> His analysis is fundamentally flawed. **LET US SEE:** Regarding WHEN WAS IT said, AND THE BREATH OF GOD HOVERED UPON THE SURFACE OF THE WATERS? ביום הראשון – REGARDING THE FIRST DAY. והבדלה ביום שני הוא דהוא – Yet IT WAS ONLY ON THE SECOND DAY THAT THE DIVISION between the waters TOOK PLACE, דכתיב – AS IT IS WRITTEN:<sup>(14)</sup> ויהי,, “מבדיל בין מים למים” – God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, AND LET IT SEPARATE BETWEEN WATER AND WATER.” ... and there was evening and there was morning, a second day.<sup>(15)</sup>

The Gemara inquires: **And how much,** in fact, is the distance between the upper and lower waters?

The Gemara presents several views: **Rav Acha bar Yaakov says:** A hairsbreadth. **And the Rabbis**

NOTES

1. Shmuel was skilled in positioning himself so that he could accomplish this (*Rashi*).
2. *Rashi* in *Ein Yaakov*, cf. *Tosafos* on 14b בחולה ד"ה.
3. Ben Zoma, as well as those who inquired of Ben Zoma, did not actually mention Shmuel's name; Shmuel lived at least two generations after Ben Zoma. Ben Zoma was simply asked about the physical possibility of cohabiting without rupturing the hymen, a technique that was known in his time (*Minchas Yehudah*, cited in *Yalkut Yeshayahu*). This technique later became associated with Shmuel, and the redactors of the Talmud wrote our passage as it appears for the sake of brevity.
4. A man had used the bathtub before her and had ejaculated into the water. When she bathed in it afterward, the semen entered her womb and impregnated her (*Rashi*). There is a report of such an occurrence: See *Chelkas Mechokeik*, *Even HaEzer* 1:8 and *Mishneh LaMelech to Rambam*, *Hil. Ishus* 15:4. [See also *Responsa, Radbaz* VII §2300, who discusses the halachic implications for the paternity of a child conceived in this way. These issues are relevant to modern medical procedures such as artificial insemination – see *Igros Moshe*, *Even HaEzer* I §10 and §71, II §11.]
5. Although the word *חיישינן*, *we suspect*, usually denotes the possibility of prohibition, Shmuel uses it here in the opposite sense (see *Shabbos* 151a with *Rashi* ושמואל ד"ה).
6. [If the semen lay within the bathtub and merely floated into her womb, how could she become pregnant thereby?]
7. When Shmuel said that a seminal emission must shoot like an arrow to be capable of fertility, he did not mean that the womb must receive the seminal emission in this way. Rather, he meant that the semen itself is fertile only when it shoots like an arrow. If such semen finds its way into a womb without being ejaculated there, it could still fertilize an egg there.
8. *Yerushalmi* recounts that they were walking in opposite directions and R’ Yehoshua greeted Ben Zoma, but Ben Zoma did not respond.
9. Literally: Wherefrom and whereto, Ben Zoma? Where are you coming from and where is your mind focused? (*Rashi*; *Rashi* in *Ein Yaakov*).
10. I.e. I was contemplating [the mysteries of] *Maaseh Bereishis* (*Rashi*).
11. There is only a space of three fingersbreadth where the dome of the

- heavens and the ground meet (*Rashi*).
11. *Genesis* 1:2.
12. Three fingersbreadth is the [approximate] height at which a mother dove hovers over her young (see *Turei Even*).
13. *Rambam* places this comment within the context of a more elaborate analogy: The king is in his palace and his subjects are in many different places. Some of them are outside the capital city; some are within the city, but are walking away from the palace; some are walking toward the palace, but cannot yet see it; some are at the palace wall and are looking for the door; some have found the door and are walking through the hallways of the palace; and some are standing before the king himself. Each of these groups describes a different level of readiness in approaching knowledge of the Divine: The subjects outside the city are all the human beings in the world who have no intellectual views at all, neither reasoned nor received. These people are barely above the level of the animals. Those who are in the city but walking away are those people who are beholden to incorrect and crooked beliefs. (These are much worse than the first.) Those who are on the way to the palace are the masses of observant Jews who are not learned. Those who are at the palace looking for the door are those scholars who are learned in parts of the Torah and believe in principles of faith based on tradition, but have never investigated the fundamentals of Judaism. Those who are in the hallways of the palace have begun such investigations and those who are with the king have achieved the ultimate aims of such investigations. In terms of *Maaseh Bereishis* and *Maaseh Merkavah*, those who are still engaged in the prerequisite studies to *Maaseh Bereishis* are outside the palace, looking for the door. This, *Rambam* says, is where R’ Yehoshua placed Ben Zoma: Ben Zoma had not yet entered the palace (grasped *Maaseh Bereishis* fully) and certainly not stood before the king (experienced *Maaseh Merkavah* properly) (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51).
14. *Genesis* 1:6,8.
15. Thus, Ben Zoma's proof from the first day has nothing to do with the upper and lower waters. [See *Eitz Yosef* who cites a defense of Ben Zoma's view. See *Maharsha* who offers a lengthy analysis of the views of *Rashi*, *Rambam* and *Ramban* regarding the definition of the upper waters.]

say: Like the space between one plank of a bridge and the next plank. מר זוטרא ואיתימא רב אסי אמר – Mar Zutra, and some say, Rav Assi, says: כתרני גלימי דפריסי אהדרי – Like two garments one spread upon the other. ואמרי לה – And some say: כתרני כסי דסחיפי אהדרי – Like two cups, one stuck inside the other.<sup>[16]</sup>

The Gemara commences a lengthy discussion of Acher (Elisha ben Avuyah), beginning with part of the Baraisa that began, "There were four who entered the Orchard":

אחר קיצץ בגטעיות אחר – ACHER CHOPPED DOWN SAPLINGS in the Orchard.<sup>[17]</sup> עליו הכתוב אומר – It is UPON HIM that THE VERSE STATES:<sup>[18]</sup> "אל-תתן את-פיך לחטיא את-בשרך" – LET NOT YOUR MOUTH BRING GUILT UPON YOUR FLESH.<sup>[19]</sup> מאי היא – What was it that happened? When Acher entered the Orchard, הוון מיטטרון – he saw the angel, Metatron, דאתיהבא ליה רשותא – who was given permission to sit in order to record the merits of the Jewish people.

הלמעלה אמר – Acher said, גמירא – "We have a tradition that above there is neither sitting, nor competition, nor the back of a head,<sup>[20]</sup> nor weariness.<sup>[21]</sup> Yet Metatron is sitting: שמא חס ושלום שתי – Perhaps (Heaven forbid!)<sup>[22]</sup> there are actually two authorities, God and Metatron."<sup>[23]</sup> אפקוהו למיטטרון – They took Metatron out<sup>[24]</sup> ומחיוהו שיתין פולסי דנורא – and inflicted upon him sixty blows of fire.<sup>[25]</sup> אמרו ליה – They said to [Metatron], מאי טעמא בי חזיתיה לא קמת מקמיה – "Why did you not stand before [Acher] when you saw him?"<sup>[26]</sup> דאתיהבא ליה רשותא למיחקק זכוותא דאחר – [Metatron] was then given permission to erase the merits of Acher.<sup>[27]</sup> וצתה – A Heavenly voice emerged and said,<sup>[28]</sup> "שובו – Return, O wayward sons – except for Acher."<sup>[29]</sup> אמר – [Acher] said to himself, הואיל ואישריך – "Since that person [himself] has been banished from that world [the World to Come], ליפוק

## NOTES

16. [These four Amoraim describe spaces that are progressively smaller. A hairsbreadth is a separation, albeit a very small separation; the planks of a bridge touch each other side by side without separation; the folds and wrinkles of two garments spread upon each other actually go into each other; and in regard to the two cups, one cup is placed within the other, the contours of one perfectly matching the contours of the other.]

17. I.e. he adopted false theological beliefs (*R' Avraham min HaHar*; see *Rashi* here, cited above, 14b note 30; see below, note 23).

18. *Ecclesiastes* 5:5.

19. The verse ends: *and do not say before the angel that it was an error. Why should God be angered by your speech and destroy the work of your hands?* (See *Maharsha* cited below in note 27).

20. Because [in Ezekiel's vision of the *Merkavah*, the *Chayos* are described as] having faces on all sides. Thus, there is no back of a head (*Rashi*).

21. *Rambam* understands this teaching to be a clear statement of God's incorporeality, His utter removal from all physical things and forces. *Rambam* cites our Gemara's statement in his explanation of the third of his Thirteen Principles of Faith (*Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 10:1 *ר"ה ויהיור השלשי*). *Rashi*, however, seems to understand that the statement addresses angels, i.e. that among angels there is no sitting, competition, etc. (see previous note).

22. [The words חס ושלום are not Elisha ben Avuyah's words; they are an interpolation of the Gemara.]

23. Elisha ben Avuyah reached beyond his mental grasp. He attained a perception that he could not readily assimilate within his system of theological assumptions. He therefore jumped to a conclusion, abandoning for a moment the cautious reasoning these issues demand (*Moreh Nevuchim* 1:32). The conclusion to which he leaped was the false and heretical belief of dualism. *Rav Hai Gaon* (cited in *HaKoseiv* and in *Otzar HaGeonim, Teshuvos*) states that Acher's heresy was akin to the [Zoroastrian] beliefs of the Magi. They believed in two gods, Hormizd and Ahormin [or Ormuzd and Ahriman], one a source of good and one a source of evil, one a source of light and one a source of darkness. [Acher apparently recognized Metatron as a secondary and lesser god (see below). Thus, the specific form of dualism to which he subscribed seems similar to Gnosticism, the belief in one superior god and one inferior god (*Rav Saadiah Gaon* refers in passing to believers in this kind of dualism in his commentary to *Daniel* 7:13). If so, Metatron would be in the role of the inferior god.]

[It seems that, in some way, Elisha ben Avuyah mistook Metatron for God. A possible explanation of his error may be as follows: The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 38b states that "God's Name is in Metatron." *Rashi* to *Exodus* 23:21 explains that the numerical value of מטטרון is equal to that of God's Name, שדי. *Rashi* elsewhere (to *Genesis* 17:1 and 43:14) explains that this Name connotes sufficient power to supply the needs of everything in our world. *Ramban* (to *Exodus* 12:12) notes that Metatron is the agent God uses to accomplish all the deeds that are performed on earth. (*Ramban* even cites a view that the name Metatron derives from a Greek word meaning "agent.") Thus, God channels whatever is needed to supply the world through Metatron, and thus the name שדי

describes Metatron also in a limited sense. Now, although Metatron is as nothing compared to the Infinite God, but from the perspective of a finite human being looking through finite eyes, the vision of Metatron might be confused with a perception of God. Indeed, the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* expounds a verse as a warning not to exchange God for Metatron. This was a warning that Acher did not heed.]

24. From behind the Partition (*Ein Yaakov*).

25. A פולסא denotes [the strike of] a stick (see *Rashi* and *Targum HaLaaz*). Here, Metatron received stick-blows of fire. The number sixty is not meant precisely, but is used by the Gemara to indicate a large number (*Eitz Yosef*, citing *Bava Kamma* 92b with *Tosafos* שיתן *ר"ה*). [Alternatively, sixty is precise and parallels the thirty-nine lashes administered by an earthly Rabbinical Court. The courts in the lower world can impose a punishment upon someone from the age of thirteen and up; the courts in the upper world can impose a punishment only from twenty and up. An earthly court administers thirty-nine lashes, which is three for each year, and a Heavenly court administers sixty, which is also three for each year (*Chidushim* in *Ein Yaakov*, citing *Tosafos*; this *Tosafos* is not extant).]

26. So that he should not err and think there are two deities (*Maharsha*). [Metatron had not actually done anything wrong. He was given the sixty blows in front of Acher to demonstrate that Metatron had to submit to a Higher Authority. But Metatron experienced no pain from these blows (see *Tosafos* here and in *Ein Yaakov*). However, within the metaphor of the narrative, a reason must be given why Metatron had to receive the blows (*Maharsha*).]

27. At this point, we can understand how all the parts of the verse cited above apply to Acher: *Do not say before the angel that it was an error: Do not say that your belief in dualism was an innocent mistake that resulted from seeing Metatron sitting; Why should God be angered by your speech: As a result of your comment, God will be angry at you, for that kind of error is tantamount to an intentional sin. The idea of dualism should never even be entertained in one's mind; and destroy the work of your hands: all your previous good deeds will be erased (Maharsha).*

28. *Jeremiah* 3:14.

29. For he knew My glory and nevertheless rebelled against Me (*Ein Yaakov*). The consequences of a devout person's actions are much greater than those of a lesser person. Depending on the spiritual level of a person, his deeds reach higher and higher into the supernal worlds (see *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:4,6). When the great Tanna Elisha ben Avuyah sinned through a heretical belief while experiencing a *Merkavah* vision, the damage was of catastrophic proportions.

It is clear from the Gemara below that Acher himself thought that he was permanently excluded from the possibility of repentance. However, many of the commentators note that the gates of repentance are never shut (*Devarim Rabbah* 2:12). Thus, they assert that God would certainly have accepted him back, had he repented. Nothing stands in front of repentance (see *Maharsha*). The message of the Heavenly Voice was simply that God would not encourage Acher to repent, as God encourages others (*Shelah, Rosh Hashanah, perek Derech Chaim*, in a gloss by the son of the *Shelah*).

ליתחני בהאי עלמא – let him go out and indulge his pleasures in this world.” נפק אחר לתרבות רעה – Acher thus strayed to the ways of bad society.<sup>[30]</sup> נפק אשכח זונה תבעה – He went out, found a harlot and asked for her services.<sup>[31]</sup> אמרה ליה – She said to him, ולא אלישע בן אבויה את – “But are you not the great Sage, Elisha ben Avuyah?” עקר פוגלא ממישרא בשבת – אחר uprooted a radish from a radish patch on the Sabbath, which is a capital offense, and gave the radish to her. אמרה – She said, אחר הוא – “This must be someone else.”<sup>[32]</sup>

The Gemara cites the first of several incidents involving Acher and his disciple in Torah studies, R' Meir:

שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שזנא לתרבות רעה – Acher once asked R' Meir a question after [Acher] had already strayed to the ways of bad society. אמר ליה – [Acher] said to [R' Meir], מאי דכתיב – “What is the meaning of that which is written:<sup>[33]</sup> “גם את־זה לעמת־זה עשה האלהים” – God has made the one as well as the other?” אמר לו – [R' Meir] replied to him, כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא ברא כנגדו – “Whatever thing the Holy One, Blessed is He, created, He created something else corresponding to it: ברא הרים ברא גבעות – He created mountains, He created hills; ברא ימים ברא נהרות – He created seas, He created rivers: and so on.”<sup>[34]</sup> אמר לו – [Acher] said to him, רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך – “That is not what R' Akiva your teacher said. אלא ברא צדיקים ברא רשעים – Rather, he taught you that [God] created righteous persons and He created wicked persons;<sup>[35]</sup> ברא גן עדן ברא גיהנום – He created the Garden of Eden and He created Gehinnom. כל אהר ואהר יש לו שני חלקים – Each and every person has two portions, אהר בגן עדן ואהר בגיהנום – one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehinnom. וזה צדיק – When a righteous person merits, נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגן עדן – he takes his portion and his peer's portion in the Garden of Eden; נתחייב – when a wicked person becomes guilty, נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגיהנום – he takes his portion and his peer's portion in Gehinnom.”<sup>[36]</sup>

The Gemara comments on the teaching cited by Acher: מאי קרא – Rav Mesharshiya said: What is that teaching's source in Scripture? There are actually two verses: גבי צדיקים כתיב – In regard to the righteous, it is written:<sup>[37]</sup> “לכן בארצם משנה ירשו” – therefore, they will

inherit a double portion in their land, and eternal gladness will be theirs. וגבי רשעים כתיב – And in regard to the wicked, it is written:<sup>[38]</sup> “ומשנה שברון שברם” – Bring upon them a day of evil and devastate them with double disaster.

Another dialogue between Acher and R' Meir: שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שזנא לתרבות רעה – Acher asked R' Meir a question after he had already strayed to the ways of bad society. אמר ליה – “What is the meaning of that which is written:<sup>[39]</sup> “לא יערכנה זהב וזכוכית ותמורתה . . . כלי־כסף” – But as for wisdom . . . mankind does not know its worth . . . gold and glass cannot approximate it, nor can its exchange be [in] golden articles?” אמר לו – [R' Meir] replied to him, אלו רברי תורה שקשין לקנותן בכלי זהב ובלי פז – “This refers to matters of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as gold vessels and fine gold vessels, ונוחין לאבדן בכלי זכוכית – but are as easy to lose through forgetfulness as glass vessels.”<sup>[40]</sup> אמר לו – [Acher] said to him, רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך – “That is not what R' Akiva, your teacher, said. אלא מה בלי – Rather, he taught you that just as there is a remedy for gold vessels and glass vessels even if they break,<sup>[41]</sup> אף תלמיד חכם – so too a Torah scholar; אף על פי שסרה יש לו תקנה – even if he sours, there is a remedy for him: He can repent.”<sup>[42]</sup> אמר לו – [R' Meir] said to [Acher], אף אתה חזור בך – “So, you too, as a great Torah scholar, return to your earlier devotion!” אמר לו – [Acher] said to him, “I have already heard from behind the Partition, שובו בני, Return O wayward sons – except for Acher.”

A subsequent incident involving Acher and R' Meir; AN INCIDENT OCCURRED WITH ACHER, WHO WAS RIDING ON A HORSE ON THE SABBATH, AND R' MEIR WAS WALKING BEHIND HIM IN ORDER TO LEARN TORAH FROM HIS MOUTH. אמר לו – At a certain point, [ACHER] SAID TO HIM, מאיר חזור לאחריך – MEIR, GO BACK, FOR I HAVE ALREADY CALCULATED THROUGH THE FOOTSTEPS OF MY HORSE THAT THE SABBATH BOUNDARY EXTENDS UNTIL HERE.<sup>[43]</sup> אמר לו – [R' MEIR] REPLIED TO HIM, אף אתה חזור בך – “YOU TOO, GO BACK TO YOUR earlier Torah observance!”

## NOTES

30. He forsook the observance of the mitzvot. Apparently, though, he still studied and taught Torah (see Gemara below). R' Tzadok explains (Sefer HaZichronot p. 63) that after his Merkavah experience, Acher thought that his connection with the upper worlds made his observance of halachah unnecessary (see there at length).

31. This was his first open sin (see Ben Yehoyada).

32. That is how Elisha ben Avuyah received the name by which our Gemara calls him: Acher, the Other, or Someone Else (Tashbetz in Magen Avos to Pirkei Avos 4:20).

[Except here, our Gemara does not refer to him by his original name. It appears that the Heavenly Voice actually said, “except for Elisha ben Avuyah,” and the Gemara altered this to “except for Acher,” so as not to mention his name. Indeed, the Yerushalmi quotes the Heavenly Voice as saying, “except for Elisha ben Avuyah.”]

33. Ecclesiastes 7:14.

34. The word לעמא thus implies two things that are similar to each other in kind [but differ in degree: God created the great mountains and the smaller hills; the great seas and the smaller rivers] (see Maharsha).

35. According to this interpretation, the word לעמא indicates an opposite relationship (Maharsha).

36. A righteous person introduces virtue into the world and thereby alters the nature of the world and the people in it. His noble deeds induce others to be virtuous as well. A person is credited for the good deeds he

did as well as those good deeds he helped to bring about. Conversely, a wicked person brings evil into the world and indirectly induces others to sin. He is held to account for both his sins and the sins of those affected by him. Now, the wicked person is rewarded in this world for his few good deeds; thus, his portion in the Garden of Eden is given to the righteous, who are responsible for introducing virtue into the world. Conversely, the righteous are punished for their few wicked acts in this world; thus, their portion in Gehinnom is passed on to the wicked (see Beis HaLevi, Noach).

37. Isaiah 61:7.

38. Jeremiah 17:18.

39. Job 28:12, 13, 17.

40. [If one is careless with a glass vessel, it will slip from one's hand and shatter. If one is careless with one's Torah knowledge, it likewise will slip away.]

41. They can be re-melted and re-formed.

42. Acher had his mind on his own predicament; that is why he asked these questions (Maharsha).

43. Even though Acher himself no longer observed the Sabbath, he did not want to cause R' Meir any anguish. If R' Meir would find out that he had unwittingly violated the Sabbath, he would be distressed. Alternatively, Acher wished to show off his great intelligence (Etz Yosef, citing Yefei Toar).

אמר לו - [ACHER] SAID TO HIM, וְלֹא כִּבֵּר אֶמְרֹתַי לָךְ - "AND HAVE I NOT ALREADY TOLD YOU, כִּבֵּר שְׂמֵעֵתִי מֵאַחֲרֵי הַפֶּרֶגוֹד - I HAVE ALREADY HEARD FROM BEHIND THE PARTITION, שׁוּבוּ בָּנִים,, חוץ מֵאֶחָד אֶחָד." חוץ מֵאֶחָד "שׁוּבֵי־בָנִים" - "RETURN O WAYWARD SONS - EXCEPT FOR ACHER." Unwilling to leave matters as they were, [R' MEIR] GRABBED [ACHER] AND THRUST HIM INTO A BEIS MEDRASH.<sup>[44]</sup> אמר ליה לינוקא - [ACHER] SAID TO A YOUNG BOY standing outside, פֶּסוּק לִי פְּסוּקָךְ - "RECITE YOUR VERSE FOR ME."<sup>[45]</sup> אמר לו - [THE BOY] SAID TO [ACHER],<sup>[46]</sup> "אֵין שְׁלוֹם,, אמר ה' לְרָשָׁעִים" - "THERE IS NO PEACE, HASHEM SAID, TO THE

WICKED."<sup>[47]</sup> עֲזִילִיה לְבִי כְּנִישְׁתָּא אַחֲרֵיתִי [R' MEIR] BROUGHT HIM INTO A DIFFERENT SYNAGOGUE. אמר ליה לינוקא - [ACHER] SAID TO A BOY nearby, פֶּסוּק לִי פְּסוּקָךְ - "RECITE YOUR VERSE FOR ME." אמר לו - [THE BOY] SAID TO HIM,<sup>[48]</sup> "כִּי אִם-תִּכְבְּסֵי בְּנֵי־מַיִם - EVEN IF YOU WERE TO WASH WITH NITER AND USE MUCH SOAP, נִקְתָּם עֲוֹנָךְ לִפְנֵי - YOUR INIQUITY REMAINS STAINED BEFORE ME."<sup>[49]</sup> עֲזִילִיה לְבִי כְּנִישְׁתָּא אַחֲרֵיתִי [R' MEIR] BROUGHT HIM INTO A DIFFERENT SYNAGOGUE. אמר ליה - [ACHER] SAID

## NOTES

44. [Perhaps the setting would inspire him to repent.]

45. I.e. recite the verse that you studied most recently. Acher, who had heard a Divine decree that his repentance would not be accepted, as the Gemara related above, wanted to prove it to R' Meir by the child's verse (*Rabbeinu Chananel*). It was common in earlier times to make this request of schoolchildren, because the verse cited by a child would convey a prophetic message to the one requesting it (see *Bava Basra* 12b; see also *Rambam, Hil. Avodas Kochavim* 11:5 with *Kesef Mishneh*).

46. *Isaiah* 48:22.

47. Normally, if someone comes to the study hall, it is appropriate to greet him, to say to him, "*Shalom aleichem!*" When Acher came, though, God told him "*Ein shalom*" - there are no warm greetings for you.

48. *Jeremiah* 2:22.

49. I.e. repentance will not help (*Maharsha*).