

# Chiasmus in Talmudic-Aggadic Narrative

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One component of the beauty of any work of art is the distribution or arrangement of its parts. This probably holds true for literature as much as for any other artistic medium. In regard to narrative literature, analyzing the distinctive elements of a given composition and detecting the order in which those elements are arranged is apt to shed light upon the tensions within, as well as the completeness throughout the plot, making these endeavors therefore two of the tasks of the critic. There is a wider range of possible sequences at the disposal of each writer,<sup>1</sup> only one of which will be presently examined as it manifests itself in aggadic narrative sections of the Talmud.

It is only natural that there should be a developmental change between a narrative's opening and its ending. Between its introductory and its concluding situations, we usually discern a contrast or at least a clear difference in the situations of the characters involved. The apparent structure is therefore:

A The Opening B The Plot A' The End

Consider a simple example.<sup>2</sup> It opens with Rav Ashi's request that two professional mourners tell him how they would eulogize him at his funeral. After the first mourner has pronounced his eulogy, the other claims to be able to do better and promptly recites his; but Rav Ashi is dissatisfied with both. In the end, the legs of both men become afflicted so that on Rav Ashi's death neither can attend his funeral. This anecdote begins with the words: „On that day, what are you going to say?“ and it ends with „On that day, neither came to eulogize him.“ The A–B–A' structure is clearly designed to emphasize the opposition between a person's wish to know what will be said of him after his death, and the fact that on that occasion nothing will be said of him at all. Since all aggadic tales have a religious-didactic purpose, we are expected to infer from the present one that the excessive pride of a man who wants to hear his own praise is reprehensible.

Although typically very short, the plot of the aggadic story will frequently be further subdivided. In the foregoing example, the two eulogies are juxtaposed to Rav Ashi's displeasure and to the mourners' affliction:

A Opening B First eulogy B' Second eulogy C Displeasure C' Affliction A' Conclusion

The turning point may here be seen to occur between B' and C, but such neat symmetry is not absolutely necessary. The crisis may be shifted from the center to the flanks and the single elements may be of varying sizes. Moreover, one element need not follow the other in chronological sequence, but rather find its counterpart at a later stage of the plot. In such cases, the scheme is A–B–C–B'–A'. Then, the story follows another course, as the tension between B and B' necessarily differs to some extent from the one between A and A'. A gifted writer may succeed in constructing all parts of his plot in this way and thus achieve a complete inverse parallelism or chiasm such as A–B–C–C'–B'–A'. Thus, many options of artistic structure are open to him. How they were used in aggadic literature will now be illustrated in detail in six particular passages.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Joseph honors the Sabbath* (TB, *Shabbat* 119a) *Yosef-moqir-shabbat*<sup>4</sup> had a certain Gentile in his vicinity who owned much property. Said to him the [soothsaying] astrologers: „All your property, Joseph-who-honors-the-Sabbath will enjoy it [one day].“ So he went, sold his property and bought instead a pearl which he put into his

garment. When he crossed [the river] on a ferry,<sup>5</sup> the wind blew his garment off and cast it into the water, where a fish swallowed it.<sup>6</sup> [The fishermen] hauled it up and brought it [to the marketplace] on Sabbath Eve before evening (i.e. Friday before sunset). Said [the fishermen]: „Who would buy at this [late] hour?“ Said [the other people]: „Go and take it to Joseph-who-honors-the-Sabbath who is wont to buy [choice food for the sake of the Sabbath].“ They took it to him, he bought it, opened it and found the pearl, and sold it for twelve purses of gold *denarii*. A certain old man met him and said unto him: „He who lends to the Sabbath, the Sabbath repays him.“

A simple key to understanding the structure of the story is the repetition of selling and buying: The rich man *sells* his property and *buys* the pearl, Joseph *buys* a fish and *sells* the pearl. Its scheme therefore is:

A Opening B The Gentile sells C The Gentile buys D Centerpiece C' Joseph buys B' Joseph sells  
A' Conclusion

The centerpiece of how the pearl happened to pass from the hands of the Gentile into Joseph's is divided into two parts: in the first, the pearl is in the garment which the wind casts into the river away from its original owner; in the second, the pearl „moves“ toward Joseph by being swallowed by a fish which is offered for sale and discussed in the market and finally taken to Joseph. Since the fish serves as „means of transportation,“ the swallowing of the garment terminates the pearl's movement away from its first owner (for which reason the garment itself is not mentioned again) and starts its eventual movement toward its second owner. This again points to a sort of chiasm within D:

D The pearl's „movement“ away from the Gentile Center and turning point D' The pearl's „movement“ toward Joseph

Let us now consider the two inverted parallelisms within each other and start with the inner one. The two „movements“ differ from each other insofar as the first is brought about by the wind and the fish, two natural causes devoid of human volition, whereas in the second, people, namely fishermen and fishmongers, are active. When the fishermen arrive at the market at a late hour, when most Jews have already made their purchases for the approaching Sabbath, they wonder: „Who would still buy at this late hour?“ This is when Joseph is first mentioned. Had the storyteller intended to parallel the two „movements,“ he could have let the fish be offered for sale early on Friday, let Joseph pass by the fishmongers out of chance and -- again by chance -- buy that particular fish. But his aim was to tell us that only because of Joseph's special love of the Sabbath did the pearl reach him, and this is the function of the dialogue in the marketplace. The relation between the two „movements“ is thus underscored by their respective positions immediately before and after the turning point, by their directions moving away and toward, and also by their nature: quasi-technical means versus freely willed human actions. The result is a well-balanced dialectical-chiastic core.

This core then further illuminates the remaining elements of the narrative. Selling and buying alternate. The Gentile sells his property in order to evade an unpropitious decree of the stars and buys instead an extremely precious object lacking all practical use. For him, possessing property is an aim in itself. On the other hand, Joseph buys the fish for the love of Sabbath. Although, like all other Jews in town, he probably had purchased and prepared his festive Sabbath meals, he nevertheless „pays dearly“ (*moqir*) for the Sabbath and spends his money not on increasing his property, but in carrying out a Divine precept. Once the pearl has „moved“ toward him, he does not keep it or sell it for profit. On the contrary, one is given to read between the lines that Joseph will use the twelve purses of *denarii* for „paying dearly“ for the following Sabbaths. It follows that the comparison between the two pairs of business transactions shows not only a contrast in sequence, but in content too.

In the end, an old man appears and talks to Joseph. Being a secondary figure, he has no part in the plot itself, but he interprets it. His counterpart is found in the astrologers who foretell a certain event and by so doing set the entire incident in motion. At first glance, the astrologers may seem more important than an unknown old man: after all, they know the future while he is only capable of interpreting the past. Yet in reality, they forecast only a certain mechanical and preordained occurrence effected by the blind forces of nature, whereas the old man's words are a value judgment of human actions and of their results<sup>7</sup> -- the same contrast as before.

The message of the tale, highlighted by its construction, is that in the inevitable course of nature, a man will lose his property if he holds it as an absolute goal, while his fortune will increase if he „wastes” it -- having acquired it in the first place in order to „waste” it -- on keeping a *miswa*, a commandment of the Torah.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, for the first sentence of the story („Joseph . . . property”) we do not find any parallel at its end, where the rich man is not even mentioned again. Since this sentence does in fact not carry any dramatic tension,<sup>9</sup> it must be viewed as an „exposition.” Hence, the detailed structure of the episode is the following:

Exposition A The astrologers' prophecy B The Gentile sells his property C The Gentile buys a pearl  
D The pearl „moves” away (wind, water) E A fish swallows the pearl D' The pearl „moves” toward Joseph  
(fishermen, etc.) C' Joseph buys the fish B' Joseph sells the pearl A' The old man's interpretation

## 2. R. Hiyya and the Angel of Death (TB, Mo'ed Qatan 28a)

R. Hiyya -- [the Angel of Death] was unable to approach him.<sup>10</sup> One day [The Angel of Death] disguised himself as a poor [man], came and knocked on his (i.e. R. Hiyya's) door. Said [R. Hiyya] to them (i.e. his family): „Bring bread forth to him!” They brought [it] forth to him. Said [the Angel of Death] unto him: „Does my lord not take pity on the poor? And on this man,<sup>11</sup> why does he not take pity?” He revealed himself to him and showed him a fiery stick. Then delivered [R. Hiyya] himself<sup>12</sup> to him.

The crux of this tale is embedded between its initial and final sentences. In the beginning, the Angel of Death is not able (Aramaic *masi*) to take R. Hiyya's soul because of the latter's righteousness, and in the end R. Hiyya delivers (*'amsi*) his life to him. The Aramaic paronomasia is clearly intended to connect the two sentences and to create tension between them. Since according to the first sentence, the Angel of Death cannot approach R. Hiyya in order to kill him, we would expect the story to terminate with the positive statement, that finally he could and did take the life of the *saddiq*, who ultimately had to die like all other mortals. But no, in the end R. Hiyya delivers his soul voluntarily and had he not done so, the Angel of Death would not have been able to approach him even then.

As we have seen before, such a dramatic frame is in itself not yet any proof of chiasm and additional evidence is called for. Such is furnished by the two sentences following the first and preceding the last, respectively, where the Angel of Death disguises and reveals himself. The structure is therefore thus:

A The Angel of Death is not *masi* to approach R. Hiyya B He disguises himself C The middle part B' He reveals his identity A' R. Hiyya '*amsi* his life

At first sight it seems astonishing that the Angel of Death disguises himself as a beggar. If R. Hiyya feeds him, would this not prevent his death? Does Scripture not say that „righteousness delivers from death”?<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, since it is expressly stated in the opening that the Angel of Death could not approach R. Hiyya at all, he could

not have approached him and taken his life even if he appeared to him in his full terror equipped with his „fiery stick.” The two appearances of the angel differ from each other externally, but both have the same result: R. Hiyya does not die. Only by combining the two appearances does the angel achieve his hoped-for aim. How this came to pass is elaborated in the middle part of our tale.

The Angel of Death knocks on the door without saying a single word. Immediately he is fed, because feeding the poor is a matter of course in R. Hiyya’s home. The angel does not enter the *saddiq*’s home because he „was unable to approach him,” a fact emphasized in the story by the words „bring forth.” The angel then asks two questions one, the rhetorical, connects his disguise with divulging his identity; the other is the real question and request. With the latter, the angel begins to disclose who he really is and accuses R. Hiyya of not taking pity on him, the Angel of Death: Feeding this poor man out of pity is tantamount to cruelty toward the Angel of Death, for whom the good deed by R. Hiyya prevents him from killing the sage. The two parts are again dialectically linked:

B The Angel disguised at the door C R. Hiyya takes pity on him D The link: a rhetorical question C’ „Why does he not take pity?” B’ The Angel drops his disguise

The contrast between disguise and disclosure shows what the angel had in mind. Since there is no chance for him that R. Hiyya would cease observing *miswot*, the angel hopes that dying would become another *miswa* to R. Hiyya: he will take pity on the Angel of Death exactly as he is used to taking pity on the poor. Equating pity on the poor with pity on the Angel of Death is not an easy matter. For the ordinary reader, there lies some irony in the angel’s question „Why don’t you pity me?” How can one pity the Angel of Death? R. Hiyya perceives this question in the fullness of its awe when he recognizes the Angel of Death with, and by, his fiery stick on his doorsteps:<sup>14</sup> You cannot dismiss the Angel of Death by sending and feeding him a piece of bread. And if one is not capable of taking pity on Death and Fire, how genuine and deep is one’s pity on the poor? R. Hiyya’s last moment thus becomes the supreme test of his entire lifetime, and he passes the test by delivering his life.

3. *R. Meir aud Aher*<sup>15</sup> (*TB, Hagiga 15a*) An episode concerning Aher who was riding on horseback on a Sabbath<sup>16</sup> while R. Meir was walking behind him in order to learn Tora from his mouth. Said [Aher] unto him: „Meir, turn back behind yourself, because I have already estimated according to the horse’s steps: this is the Sabbath boundary.”<sup>17</sup> Said he unto him: „You too turn “Said he unto him: „I have already heard from behind the curtain:<sup>18</sup> ‘Return, o faithless children’<sup>19</sup> -- all except Aher.”

The story consists of five parts:

(1) Aher transgresses Torah commandments (2) R. Meir learns Torah from Aher’s mouth (3) Aher warns R. Meir (4) R. Meir asks Aher to repent (5) There is no way for Aher to repent

We immediately notice that the two sages alternate on the stage. Let us examine the role of each separately.

Parts (1) and (5), where Aher alone is active, form the external frame and stress Aher’s unforgivable sin. Had the author wanted to weaken this impression, he could have incorporated some of (3) already in (1) and written for instance: „An episode concerning Aher who when riding on horseback on a Sabbath estimated according to his horse’s steps, for R. Meir’s sake who was walking behind him, that . . . .” The author does the opposite: he lets Aher sin in isolation. Similarly, and even more so, in (5), Aher sins again where he is totally alone. All sinners may repent, but not Aher: even his repentance is not acceptable anymore.

In (3), teacher and pupil are together, but here too Aher prefers his loneliness: R. Meir will return to town while Aher continues, riding on his horse further away from town. To be sure, we sense that Aher does not cease thinking of R. Meir and respecting his conviction, but we are not sure of the nature of this respect: does he count his horse's steps in order to rid himself of R. Meir or because he wants to prevent his beloved pupil from sinning too? The reader is inclined to assume that R. Meir understands his former master's words in the second manner, yet the words „Turn back” (Heb: *la'ahoreka* = behind yourself) instead of the equally possible „Let us stop here for a moment and continue our discourse” point to the first interpretation, i.e. to Aher's wish to leave his disciple, which moreover fits the „isolationist” frame sentences. With this wish of his to be left alone, Aher conforms on earth with what had been decreed on him in Heaven: „Return -- all except Aher,” Parts (1), (3) and (5) are thus related to each other.

They are opposed to parts (2) and (4) in which R. Meir is active. He fervently desires to break Aher's solitude and seeks to achieve this aim in two ways. First, he walks after Aher, i.e. follows his master in the latter's direction. His wish „to learn Torah from his mouth” and his willingness to follow both fit each other, and in both Aher is the dominant factor. R. Meir „follows” Aher without fear because he is aware of the proscribed boundaries and also trusts that Aher will not try to divert him from righteous conduct, which is indeed borne out by Aher's warning in (3). But why should R. Meir show so much interest in a heretic? For his teaching? Is there really no purer source of instruction in Israel? The reply to these questions is given in (4) which explains (2) just as (3) and (5) explain each other. R. Meir, wanting Aher to repent, believes that the more Aher instructs him, the greater the chances that Aher will repent. In (3) it seems that he employs the appropriate means, as he may interpret Aher's words as a genuine care for him, Aher's disciple. Therefore R. Meir goes further and in (4) implores Aher to repent. He uses Aher's own words „turn back” as if he wanted to say: „Let us now continue together on our common way, but in the opposite direction, and return to observing the commandments of the Torah.” The equivocal double use of the Hebrew word for „turn back” is certainly not brought about by chance, but implies: Just as you led me until now in one direction and I followed you, so let me lead you from now on in the opposite direction. A tension similar to the ambiguous „turn back” exists between „behind him” (Heb. *'aharaw*) in (2) and „behind yourself” (Heb. *la'ahoreka*) in (3): they are almost equal in sound, but contradictory in meaning. Thus, the expression „Turn back behind yourself” contains the two possible interpretations of (3) and hints at the dialectical relation between (3) on the one hand and (2) and (4) on the other.

A diagram may serve to summarize:

A Aher – alone – sins B R. Meir walks behind him in one direction C „Turn back behind yourself” for Aher, a parting of the ways for R. Meir, a readiness to repent B' R. Meir tries to turn Aher back in the opposite direction A' Aher – alone – is excluded from repentance

#### 4. R. Yona and his Sack (TB, Ta'anit 23b)

R. Yona, father of R. Mani: When the world needed rain, he took a sack and said: „I shall go and bring a zuz's worth, of grain.” He went and stopped at a deep and hidden place and covered himself with the sack and asked for mercy and rain fell. When he came [home] they said unto him: „Did you bring a thing?” Said he unto them: „I said [to myself]: since rain fell, the world was relieved.”

The structure of this passage is easily recognizable. It consists of three parts, the first and last of which chiasmatically envelop the center:

A The world needs rain B R. Yona at home taking a sack says that he will bring grain C R. Yona leaves his home D He prays alone away from home; rain falls C' He returns home B' He is asked whether he brought a thing A' The world is relieved

The action takes place on two levels: that of the „world,” i.e. in the public domain which includes R. Yona’s household, and that of R. Yona himself. The „world” is in need of rain, yet people agree that one should buy „a zuz’s worth of grain,” in other words, that daily routine still takes precedence. Obviously there must have been a famine where R. Yona lived as otherwise none of his household would have understood why he left his place in order to buy a small quantity of flour.<sup>20</sup> While he is away from home, it rains, but those who were in such dire need of it behave just as before: not knowing what R. Yona had done in the meantime, they ask him whether he has „brought a thing.” Their question illustrates their static behavior and forms the conjunction between the first and the last parts. In contrast, on R. Yona’s level, there is dramatic tension. He intends to use the sack for a purpose totally different from the one he declares. Far away from his home and town, he prays in a manner tradition would demand: clad in sackcloth<sup>21</sup> and „at a deep place.”<sup>22</sup> He shuns the public eye so that it may not become known how powerful his prayer is. The intensity of his prayer offered in solitude and hiding evokes God’s mercy: rain comes.

With this dramatic result the story could have ended, but the storyteller wished R. Yona to prove his loneliness in one more situation. To the question „Did you bring a thing?” one would have expected the reply, „Yes, my prayer caused the rain to fall.”<sup>23</sup> Instead, R. Yona’s answer is fully consonant with the level on which his household lives: „Rain fell and the world was relieved.” His last words „rain” and „world” also occur (in inverted order) in the opening, just as „relief” in the end is matched by „need” in the beginning.

Apart from these contrasts which express the external dramatic tension of this tale, there is yet another between the beginning and the end. The first sentence is the author’s and there is no opposition there between R. Yona and the „world.” Not so in the last sentence: there, R. Yona himself speaks, intensifying the tension between the two levels of this story: his words are true for the „world,” but they still conceal the entire truth. R. Yona remains remote even at the end.

5. *Rav Pappa and the Fast (TB, Ta’anit 24b)* Rav Pappa decreed a fast [because of the drought]. [While fasting himself] his heart became weak<sup>24</sup> and he ate a bit, then he asked for mercy, but no rain came. Said unto him Rav Nahman bar Ishparty,<sup>25</sup> „Had you swallowed a [whole] bowl of porridge, rain would have come.” [Then] his (i.e. Rav Pappa’s) mind became weak<sup>26</sup> and rain came.

The tension in this story is again accentuated by the lack of rain, followed by one „weakness” in the beginning, and rainfall, preceded by different „weakness” in the end. The matter of rain also reappears in the middle: „no rain came,” „rain would have come.” This is illustrated by a diagram:

A Rav Pappa decreed a fast because no rain had come B His heart became weak C He ate a bit, asked for mercy, but no rain came C' „Had you swallowed . . . rain would have come” B' His mind became weak A' Rain came

Unlike the preceding stories, this one lacks the central axis of the chiasmic construction, which fact lends a certain autonomy to each half. Let us examine each separately.

The first half ends on a note of disappointment: no rain came. But why? We are not explicitly told the reason, but we may infer it from C: because Rav Pappa had broken the fast. But why did he do this? Again we may reason that because of his weak physical state he believed himself to be incapable of intense prayer, and since he believed prayer to take precedence over fasting, „he ate a bit.” At this point, we are still unclear how Rav Pappa himself understood the failure of his prayer and whether he held himself responsible for it.

The second half opens with a surprising response. Its plain sense is, „Had you eaten more, your prayer would have been more intense and rain would have fallen,” which seems to confirm and conform to Rav Pappa’s own way of thinking. Yet Rav Nahman’s remark is in fact a sarcastic sneer: „Since you ate, be it only a bit, you broke the fast and actually prevented rain from falling.” Is there something in the first half to substantiate this interpretation of Rav Nahman’s words? Yes, if we permit ourselves to interpolate a *pausa* after C as if to say, „So Rav Pappa suspected, on reflection, that his eating may have caused the drought to continue.” This pause would then supply the missing center of the chiasm. While assuming it on structural grounds, this reasoning is further corroborated by the expression „his mind became weak” in the second half. Rav Pappa does not recoil against Rav Nahman’s censure: rather, he accepts it, feels ashamed and regrets having eaten.

Analyzing the chiasm demands a comparison between his two „weaknesses.” As to the first, it is merely a physical fact serving as a starting point of the plot which has nothing to do with Rav Pappa’s personality. As a result of this weakness, he eats, and whether this was the correct thing to do or not is left open as immaterial. Not so his second „weakness.” This time, it is the conscious retreat of a public figure who is rebuked in front of others, who acknowledges his mistake by his silence and refrains, because of shame, from defending himself and repartée. At this point, the entire matter of fasting and breaking the fast, whether justified or not, becomes immaterial too: Heaven looks favorably on such self-humiliation, prefers it to the mortification of the flesh, and lets rain come.

6. *The Hasid and his Wife* (TJ. *Ta’anit* 1:4, 64b) It became known to the sages: „The *hasid* of Kefar Imi<sup>27</sup> will pray and rain will fall.” So the sages went to him. Said (Aram. 3rd pers. sing. fem.!) his „household”<sup>28</sup> unto them: „He is up on the mountain.” So they went forth to him and greeted him, but he did not answer their greeting. He sat down to eat, but did not say unto them, „Come and eat with me.” On his way home, he gathered kindling wood, [placed it on his shoulder] and spread the overgarment on top of the burden. Entering [his home] he said unto his „household,” „These sages want us to pray so that rain may fall. If I pray and rain falls, it is to their discredit, and if not (i.e. if no rain falls after my prayer) the Heavenly Name is profaned. Therefore come (Aram. 2nd per. fem.!), I and you (Aram. 2nd pers.fem.I), and let us go up [to the upper story] and pray there. If rain falls, let us tell them that Heaven has already performed a miracle, and if not, let us tell them that we are not worthy of praying and being answered.” [So] they went [up] and prayed, and rain fell. He [then] went down and said unto them, „Why did the sages happen to come here today?” Said they unto him, „We ask you to pray so that rain may fall.” Said he unto them, „Do you [really] need my prayer? Heaven has already performed a miracle.” Said they unto him, „Why, when you were on the mountain and we greeted you, did you not answer us?” Said he unto them, „I was engaged in my day-laborer’s work. Could I have turned my mind away from my work?”<sup>29</sup> Said they unto him „And why, when you sat down to eat, did you not tell us to join you?” Said he unto them, „I had no more than my slice [of bread]; should I have spoken to you with hypocrisy?” Said they unto him, „And why, when you went home, did you put the overgarment on top of the burden?” Said he unto them, „It did not belong to me but was loaned to me so that I might pray in it.”<sup>30</sup> [Would you prefer that] I should have torn it?” Said they unto him, „And why, when you were on that mountain, was your wife in dirty clothes, and why, when you came back from the mountain, was she dressed in clean clothes?” Said he unto them, „While I was on the mountain, she was dressed in dirty clothes lest a man be attracted by her, and when

I returned from the mountain, she was dressed in clean clothes lest I be attracted by another woman.” Said they unto him, „You indeed are worthy of praying and being answered.”

Twice are we told in this story what the *hasid* has been doing on that mountain: once as seen through the eyes of the author and a second time as explained by the *hasid*. Similarly, the theme of his prayer for rain is first related by the man himself, and then again by the author. The material is then chiasmatically organized as follows:

First part A The *hasid*'s doings on the mountain B He tells his wife about the sages and the rainfall B' He tells the sages about the rainfall A' He explains his doings on the mountain Last Part

In the exact middle, the man and his wife pray for rain, and rain falls. This event, obviously the decisive one in the entire story, occurs without much previous tension as it is already unequivocally stated in the opening, in a quasi-prophetic revelation, that the *hasid* would pray and that rain would fall. Yet in his words to his wife, he twice envisages the possibility that their prayer may not succeed and that no rain fall because they were „not worthy of praying and being answered,” which is only one of several signs of his modesty. In the end, the sages declare the man to be „worthy of praying and being answered” which does not mean that in the first place they had their doubts whether his prayer would be answered, but rather that they are now convinced that he is indeed worthy of being answered. The initial, central and final sentences form the external frame of the story and point out that its principal question is whether the *hasid* is, or is not, worthy of having his prayer answered.

But what convinced the sages that this man was so worthy? Surely not what they saw in A, where they met a taciturn and rather uncouth laborer in a field whose behavior is so peculiar that they do not even have the chance of asking him to pray. To be sure, they were told in the beginning that he would pray and that rain would fall. Yet by the time they ask him to pray, it is already raining and prayer is not needed anymore. Moreover, the sages do not have any opportunity of asking the man to pray, because he does not let them speak to him but withdraws with his wife into a secluded place of his house. Since the sages are unaware of what has been discussed between husband and wife, they wonder even more whether that unusual man is worthy of praying and being answered. After the rain, when the *hasid*'s apprehension that he would be asked to pray has passed, a lively dialogue starts between him and his visitors until the end of the episode.

A detailed examination and comparison of the elements of the chiasmatic structure here is the key to their understanding. The first part of the dialogue between the visitors and their host deals with rainfall (B') and has its parallel, as mentioned above, in the initial dialogue between husband and wife (B). Part B' shows that the man is concealing the truth: While he asks the visitors for the purpose of their visit,<sup>31</sup> we remember that he knows it very well, as he previously told it to his wife. He replies to their first statement by an ambiguous question: „Do you really need my prayer?” This may either be taken as a rhetorical question: „After all, you see that rain falls even without my prayer;” or as a real one requiring the answer, „We certainly need you to pray since we were told that without it no rain would fall.” Thus, the *hasid* succeeded in hiding the truth without telling a formal lie.

How did the sages understand all this on their part? Probably they told themselves, „We were advised the man would pray and subsequently rain would fall, but did he really pray? Taking his patent modesty into account, he may have prayed when he was on the upper floor with his wife.” To make sure of his modesty and righteousness they question him about his peculiar behavior. Each question directly refers to one specific previous action except for one: the matter of the woman's clothes, which has no opposite part in the first half of the story, but only is hinted at. We are told that the „household” talked to the sages when they arrived, but in that sentence the verbal form of the predicate is feminine singular instead of masculine plural. It follows that not several servants, but one woman

talked to them, whom, however, they mistook for one of the servants because of her lowly attire. The author kept this character's identity secret, exactly as she herself did, so that they might not be attracted to her.

The considerable literary effort made here by the author asks for a thorough examination of the woman's role in all the remaining parts of the story.

Upon her husband's return home she dresses in her clean clothes, whereupon the visitors recognize her as the lady of the house. Although the author calls her again „household” we are left in no doubt that the *hasid* is speaking to his wife.<sup>32</sup> Knowing that this prayer will be of no avail unless he is joined by her, he talks to her at great length. If his prayer without her presence had had a chance of bringing rain, he could have prayed, having the necessary overgarment with him, in seclusion on the mountain where he most probably had also offered his regular daily prayer. Yet the presence of this virtuous woman is necessary so that her merit may strengthen his intercession. Though this detail seemingly contradicts the opening where only the *hasid's* prayer is mentioned, the author makes use of this contradiction in order to make his point. Since nobody looks at this woman, nobody is able to recognize how great her virtue is, except her husband for whom alone she makes herself attractive. Therefore only he knows that he needs her participation in his prayer.

The *hasid's* unusual conduct on the mountain is now becoming more comprehensible. By no means can he talk to the sages and listen to their request because he does not want to divulge to them how indispensable the presence of his wife is for his prayer, or else they would become aware of her and later be attracted to her. He is unwilling to turn his mind away from his work because, having greeted the sages, he would have to give them a lengthy explanation. Likewise is it true that a poor laborer who owns neither a field nor an overgarment for prayer cannot invite guests for a meal. His entire demeanor, though rough, is one of truthfulness, a sort of hard shell which covers a pure and humble heart. This becomes evident when he talks to his wife at the end of the first half, and of her at the end of the second. It is only in the very end that the sages realize all this when the woman has long ago disappeared behind the scene and her husband may freely tell of her greatness.

It remains for us to clarify the significance of the kindling wood and the overgarment. This detail is meant to show how little he thinks of his own comfort and what good care he takes of another's property. Such is the „hasidic” style of life of the man whom we know only by the appellation „*the hasid* of Kefar Imi” and whose name we are never told. Another reason for mentioning the overgarment is to indicate the fact that the man was properly equipped to pray on the mountain, had he wished to do so without his wife. Thirdly, the loaned overgarment is also linked to his wife's dress: while the woman has two sets of clothes, the clean one for her husband and the dirty one for the visitors, he has not even one simple overgarment, but has to borrow one which he will use only for prayer. For both husband and wife, clothing is a necessity for observing *miswot* and not for varity.

There is much development here, from the moment when the sages first see the woman and take her for a servant, to the end when they comprehend her covert virtues. It is the analysis of the chiasitic structure of the story that enabled us to detect her paramount role in it. The intricacy of the structure becomes evident in the following diagram:

A „*The hasid* will pray and rain will fall” B The woman incognito in a servant's dress C The man's conduct on the mountain D He talks to his wife of prayer and rain E Their *common* prayer: it rains D' He talks to the sages of prayer and rain C' His conduct on the mountain explained B' The woman's identity and dress finally explained to the sages A' „Worthy of praying and being answered”

7. *Conclusion* We have only examined a small number of passages. Nevertheless, within this sample, chiasmus is evident and diversified. Let us summarize the major characteristics observed here. As mentioned before, the thematic principle in literary chiasm is generally introduced by the tension created between the two extreme framing elements A and A'. It is only natural that this tension should find expression not only in the description of certain mutually opposed objective facts such as „it did not rain” against „it rained,” but much more so in the tension arising from challenges to man’s conduct and attitude, e.g. „Rav Pappa decreed a fast” or „R. Yona – when the world was in need of rain.” In such stories, man’s actions are causally significant. On certain occasions, it also happens that the storyteller cancels the simple dramatic tension by revealing at the beginning what will happen in the end, e.g. „Joseph will enjoy the Gentile’s property” or „The *hasid* will pray and rain will fall.” In such cases the reader begins to ask himself: „Why is this so? What are the merits of these people?” The chiastic use of tension develops further, as it goes without saying that there are various degrees of such tension. In the tale about Joseph, for example, the plot is quite involved, for which reason there are substantial tensions within it. On the other hand, there is little tension in the *hasid*’s story, since its end only confirms what has been said in its beginning.

The second element (B) of the chiasm plays a double role. It develops the plot and at the same time relates to B'. The rich Gentile tries to obviate fate by selling his property; the Angel of Death disguises himself as a poor man and thus only enhances R. Hiyya’s merits; R. Meir accompanies the sinner; Rav Pappa’s heart weakens; and the sages meet the woman instead of the *hasid*. Each of these developments twists the plot and changes the normal course of events. We may perhaps go so far as to generalize and say: if in an aggadic story B is no more than the natural continuation of A, the story is not fundamentally chiastic. An example is the story of the two mourners in which Rav Ashi wishes to hear their eulogies in A and which actually occurs in B, which lends the story a different literary character.

But it is the double function of B that accounts for the chiastic structure. While B finds its complement in B', it stands both opposed to A and closely related to A'. Let us illustrate this fact. The rich man sells his property to buy a pearl in order to outwit fate; he thus shows how attached he is to his riches, and it is this very action that seals his fate, hastens his well-deserved loss and, ironically, eases the pearl’s „movement” toward Joseph. A double, though not ironical, meaning lies in the Angel of Death disguising himself as a poor man, and in R. Yona’s pretending to go and buy grain. Rav Pappa’s „weakness” also has two consequences: he interrupts his fast, thus prolonging the drought and bringing on shame and repentance. Likewise R. Meir follows the sinner in the hope that he will later follow R. Meir on his way back. Finally, the *hasid*’s wife does not seem to play any essential part when the sages first meet her, and it is only in the end that it becomes clear that she fulfills a vital role in the plot. It is immaterial whether the twofold significance of these particulars is brought about by the principal figure himself -- as in the cases of R. Yona and the Angel of Death -- or by one of the author’s literary devices. In either instance, this double character introduces a stark contrast and lends the chiasm its dramatic sophisticated quality, whether it is sharply pronounced as in the Joseph and the Angel of Death stories or more subtle as in the *hasid* tale.

A comparison with chiasm of a weaker kind will shed light on this point. In the Rav Ashi story, one of the mourners says:

A Weep for the losers B and not for the lost one B' as he went to rest A' and we are left to sighs.

The quatrain opens with a play on words: The Hebrew word for „losers” (*obedim*) may also mean „those who lost their way.” Both meanings are alluded to by the mourner. Alliteration and consonance occur in B' and A': *menuha* (rest), *'anu* (we), and *'anahot* (sighs). These almost lyric devices are intended to move the listening crowd at the funeral, but there is nothing dramatic about them. Turning to his audience (in the 2nd person), the mourner

proceeds (in the 1st person) by means of „amplification” and includes himself at the end by saying „we.” The eulogy has pathos, but lacks the dramatic problematic features of our six basic texts.

The function of C and C' depends on the length of the story. If it is short, C is already its center; if longer, the role which C and C' play resembles that of B and B': to make the plot even more involved, at some times giving it a new direction, or promoting and strengthening the one begun by B. The latter occurred in the Joseph story („buying a pearl” versus „buying a fish”) and in the *hasid* story (his incomprehensible behavior on the mountain versus its explanation). Such and further subdivision of the plot into paired elements, while a sign of the author's virtuosity,<sup>33</sup> is not a necessity for introducing possible new subject matter into the story.

Now we come to the centerpieces. They present the crisis in each sample, and are the agencies for relieving the tension created by A and A' and for overcoming the conflict caused by B. When R. Yona prays in sackcloth, he not only brings the hoped-for rain but also solves for us the enigma of his words spoken to his family; in exactly the same manner, rain is brought and an enigma solved by the *hasid's* prayer. There, as well as in the Angel of Death story, the main figures are, in a certain sense, disguised in the first half of the story, but now, in the centerpiece, the „mask” drops and we begin to understand their deeds. It seems, however, that this unmasking has a more general meaning. When the fish swallows the pearl, or, at the latest, when the fish is caught, we begin to understand why the Gentile's property was exchanged for one single pearl: all had been predestined by Providence, but we saw only the mask. Observe also that an error may sometimes serve for such a mask: Rav Pappa believes in the power of fasting, yet as the plot progresses he is proved wrong. Providence knows of his error and leads him from weakness of heart by means of disappointment and insult at the centerpiece of the tale, toward a salutary „weakness of mind.”

Thus, the central crisis functions as deliverance and catharsis in all samples except one: R. Meir and Aher. Here Aher's words „Turn back,” as used by R. Meir in his fruitless attempt to influence Aher to „turn back,” are anything but cathartic, nor do they open up any avenue for a solution. Indeed, the chiasm of this story is turned upside down, or, better, it is the negative of the other stories. Aher's last sentence, starting with „I have *already* heard . . .” refers to what had happened before the entire incident and thus prejudices its outcome from its very beginning: when he rides on horseback on a Sabbath it is already quite clear that he would never repent. No tension could therefore have been created between A and A' and, in fact, there is almost none. Only in the middle, when R. Meir tries once more, tragically and in vain, to change what is preordained does tension rise to some extent.

Exactly where the centerpiece starts and ends may be defined only within view of those elements that comprise the turning point. The centerpiece need not be of the same length in all cases: a turning point may consist of a few words („and a fish swallowed it”) or take up a whole third of the text (starting from the *hasid* talking to his wife and terminating when the sages question him).

From the center on, the stories run their normal course until their end. But the Talmudic storytellers were in no hurry. They disentangle in the second half all the complications introduced by the first. The parallelisms between the two halves lend importance to every single detail and enhance the dramatic effect. Yet we get the impression that the authors were afraid that their tales might end too much as expected and that by subordinating the second half to the first, they might bore their audiences. Hence, they frequently save a certain element for a final surprise. The angel's „fery stick,” the woman's clean clothes, the Sabbath as a debtor are cases in point. In order to achieve a „last minute” surprise, the authors were at times compelled to deviate from strict chiasm.

Our subject has been analyzing the formal aspects of these stories and it is therefore only natural that we stressed that one element of literary artistry in particular. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to state that these ancient authors<sup>34</sup> were not artists in the present-day sense of the word. But undoubtedly we find much artistry in their creations, which was never to them so much an end in itself as a means for attracting listeners and readers, captivating their attention and impressing them with a specific religious or moral message.

## FOOTNOTES

1 See H. Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (München, Hueber, 1960), p. 241 ff.

2 TB, Mo'ed Quatan 25b. A more detailed analysis follows below.

3 The first five examples are taken from the Babylonian Talmud. Their texts were examined in manuscript variants and compared with those works of medieval literature, where they are quoted, in order to establish their most reliable versions before translating them into English. Hence, the present wording differs here and there from their rendering in the widely used printings and translations of the Talmud. Parts of the third example are incorporated within a lengthy description in the Palestinian Talmud (Hagiga 3:1, 77b), where, however, they do not form one single, coherent and artistic entity. The sixth example is from the Palestinian Talmud, a popular parallel of which occurs in the Babylonian (Ta'anit 23a–b).

4 While a person of this name is mentioned nowhere else in Talmudic literature, the anecdote is told as if he had been well-known in his days. This literary device -- the importance of which will become clear in the following -- is widely used in the Talmud, cf. our sixth example below. The expression *moqir* in Aramaic is ambiguous: it means both honoring and paying dearly for something.

5 The *realia* point clearly to Babylonia where people crossed rivers on ferry boats.

6 The motif of a precious object changing its owner by being swallowed by a fish who is caught to be eaten is attested in the literature, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Copenhagen/Bloomington; Indiana Univ. Press, 1955–58), B 548.2. ff.

7 The old man uses a metaphor: The Sabbath is a debtor who asks for a loan and repays it. Now, any debtor is expected to do likewise, which makes the relation between creditor and debtor technically a „mechanical” one. Yet the present debtor is the Sabbath, which implies uncertainty whether the creditor will receive his due, which again implies Joseph's „free choice.”

8 It may well be that the author used as a precedent an ancient folk-tale in which impredictability of fortune was exemplified by property passing from hand to hand by wondrous means. However, the sophistication which is expressed in the juxtaposition of the astrologers' and the old man's words proves that ours is not a folk-tale at all.

9 The author chose here not to create opposition between the rich Gentile and Joseph, though he could easily have done so by telling us that the latter was a poor man, which is further evidence that this is not a folk-tale (see note 8).

10 In the opinion of the Talmud, righteous men, by virtue of their continuously performing acts of piety, are inaccessible to the Angel of Death, be he even commanded to take their lives; cf. the passage about Rav Hisda (in Mo'ed Qatan, immediately before the present passage) and the one about King David in TB, Shabbat 30b.

11 It is customary in Aramaic usage for a man to speak of himself in the third person. The meaning of this question is therefore: „Why do you not take pity on me?”

12 The Aramaic word for „himself” is *nafshey*. Its literal translation is „his soul.” It is doubtlessly the purpose of the author to achieve a *double entendre*.

13 Prov 10:2; 11:4. For the Talmudic interpretation of this verse, see TB, Shabbat 156b.

14 The chiasmic structure of the episode entitles us to surmise that in the beginning the angel knocked on the door with his ordinary stick.

15 Aher („another man”) is one of the names by which Elisha ben Abuyah was known, a Tannaite of the first half of the second century C.E., who later renounced Judaism. He was the teacher of the great Tannaite R. Meir (see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem New York: Macmillan, 1971), VI, col. 668 ff., s.v. Elisha).

16 Horseback riding on the Sabbath is not one of the severest prohibitions, but since it was done here in public and therefore was intentionally meant to undermine the authority of the Halakha, this situation would have been viewed as a capital crime (see TB, Yebamot 90b). As the present episode occurred under Roman rule in Palestine, Aher had of course nothing to fear of a Jewish court.

17 The „Sabbath boundary” is two thousand cubits, beyond which a Jew is forbidden to walk further from the outskirts of his town.

18 A sort of partition behind which decisions of the Heavenly Court are taken and may be heard.

19 Jer. 3:14. Talmudic storytellers were fond of putting biblical quotations in the mouths of their *dramatis personae*. See my paper „Biblical Verses Quoted in Tales of the Sages,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, XXII (1971), 80 ff.

20 A *zuz* is one quarter of a *sela'* of Tyre, i.e. approximately equivalent to one Biblical *seqel*. According to the price mentioned in 2 Kings 7:2 and our knowledge about the great inflation in Talmudic times (especially during drought), R. Yona's *zuz* could not have bought much more than two pounds of grain.

21 Covering oneself with sackcloth while praying at a time of great distress is attested in the Bible as common usage, cf. Is. 58:5, Ps. 35:3, Est. 4:3, and it known also in Talmudic times, cf. Lam. Rabba 2:2.

22 Based on the verse „Out of the depths I cry to thee, o Lord” (Ps. 130:1), the sages prescribed that a person should pray while standing at a low place for humilily's sake, cf. TB, Berakot 10b and elsewhere as quoted in the *Tosefta*, Order Zera'im, Berakot 3:17 (ed. S. Liebermann, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1956, p. 16).

23 It is not impossible that the storyteller aims at ambiguity in the words „Did you bring a thing?”. Understood on the world's level, the „thing” is grain; on R. Yona's, it is rain. If so, this ambiguity is the counterpart of that of the

intended purpose of the sack. In both cases, R. Yona alone is aware of the equivocality, and thus both form another element of the chiasm.

24 In Talmudic diction, this signifies physical weakness caused by great effort or lack of food, cf. TB, Shabbat 10a and Quiddushin 40a.

25 This sage is mentioned nowhere else in the Talmud. An ancient tradition quoted by R. Natan ben Yehiel (Italy, 11th cent.) in his *Arukh* conceives of him as Rav Pappa's stepbrother (see *Arukh Completum*, ed. A. Kohut, Vienna: 1878, II, p. 173). If this tradition is trustworthy, then the clash between the two figures of the story is even sharper.

26 This idiom stands in Aramaic for melancholy and sadness caused by insult and shame.

27 This place is mentioned also in TJ, Shabbat 16:7, 15d and parallels, but its exact location as well as the *hasid* himself are not known from any other source. See also note 4.

28 This expression (Heb. *beney beyto*) is usually employed for a person's servants, cf. Gen. 15:3, Eccl. 2:7; M. Abot 1:5 (according to TB, Baba Mezi'a 60b and RaSHI *ad loc.*, and Maimonides *Yad Hazaqah*, Matenot 'Aniyim 10:17). For the importance of this expression in this story and its grammatical difficulty, see below. Literally, *beney beyto* means „his house's sons.”

29 The original uses the archaic word *pe'ula*, following Biblical usage in Lev. 19:14.

30 When praying a man is supposed to be covered with a garment, cf. TB, Shabbat 10a.

31 The Aramaic original reads *'ittarefun*, i.e. „you missed (or lost) your way.” It may be understood in two senses: either that they went in vain, since it had already rained before they asked the man to pray, or that they went from the man's house up to the mountain in vain. For more double meanings found in the dialogue between the *hasid* and the sages see below.

32 Had the author used here „wife” instead of „household” we would have had no choice but to understand that in the beginning they really met with servants and when they came from the mountain with the *hasid* they met another person – the *hasid's* wife.

33 For a further strongly chiastic example, with as many as five elements, see my paper „The Story of R. Sheila, TB Berakot 58a” *Tarbiz*, 40 (1970), 33–40.

34 We know almost nothing about the lives of the Talmudic narrators, but we may assume that they all lived in either Palestine or Babylonia between the second and the fifth centuries C. E. inasmuch as the personalities referred to in these narratives are often historically identifiable. R. Hiyya, for example, lived in Palestine at the end of the tannaitic period (late second and early third centuries C. E.); R. Yona lived in Palestine in the fourth century; and Rav Pappa was the most famous Babylonian Amora of the fifth generation (d. 371 (C. E.)).