

Once Elisha saw a child climbing a tree to shoo away a mother bird so he could take the eggs upon his father's order; sending away the mother bird and honor thy father and mother are the two mitzvot with the reward listed in the Bible as "long life." The child fell to his death, and he concluded "there is no justice and there is no Judge."

(Talmud Kiddushin 39b).

You shall send away the mother [bird], but the young you may take for yourself, that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days

(Deut: 22:7)

This is that story
The heaving high seas were laden with scum

The dull sky glowed red dust and ashes drifted in the wind circling the earth
The burdened seas slanted this way, and that, flooding
The scorched land under a daylight moon
A black oily rain rained
No one was there.

Malamud, *God's Grace*, (1982).

“And this is the meaning behind the command to shoo away the mother bird...as is stated in Tikkunei Zohar and a number of places that it (the mother bird) refers to the Holy Schechina...”

Likutei Halachos Hil Shiluach Hakan II

For Lucretius, Virgil, and Horace, they deserve, in my opinion, the honour of the greatest philosophers, as well as the best poets of their nation or age. The two first, besides what looks like something more than human in their poetry, were very great naturalists, and admirable in their morals: and Horace, besides the sweetness and elegancy of his Lyrics, appears, in the rest of his writings, so great a master of life, and of true sense in the conduct of it, that I know none beyond him. It was no mean strain of his philosophy, to refuse being Secretary to Augustus, when so great an emperor so much desired it. But all the different sects of philosophies seem to have agreed in the opinion of a wise man abstaining from public affairs, which is thought the meaning of Pythagoras's precept, to abstain from beans, by which the affairs or public resolutions in Athens were managed. They thought that sort of business too gross and material for the abstracted fineness of their speculations. They esteemed it too sordid and too artificial for the cleanness and simplicity of their manners and lives. They would have no part in the faults of a government; and they knew too well, that the nature and passions of men made them incapable of any that was perfect and good; and therefore thought all the service they could do to the state they lived under, was to mend the lives and manners of particular men that composed it. But where, factions were once entered and rooted in a state, they thought it madness for good men to meddle with public affairs; which made them turn their thoughts and entertainments to any thing rather than this; and Heraclitus, having, upon the factions of the citizens, quitted the government of his city, and amusing himself to play with the boys in the porch of the temple, asked those who wondered at him, Whether it was not better to play with such boys, than govern such men? But above all, they esteemed public business the most contrary of all others to that tranquillity of mind, which they esteemed and taught to be the only true felicity of man.

For this reason, Epicurus passed his life wholly in his garden: there he studied, there he exercised, there he taught his philosophy; and, indeed, no other sort of abode seems to contribute so much to both the tranquility of mind and indolence of body, which he made his chief ends. The sweetness of air, the pleasantness of smell, the verdure of plants, the cleanness and lightness, of food, the exercises of working or walking; but above all, the exemption from cares and solicitude, seem equally to favour and improve both contemplation and health, the enjoyment of sense and imagination, and thereby the quiet and ease both of the body and mind. Though Epicurus be said to have been the first that had a garden in Athens, whose citizens before him had theirs' in their villas or farms without the city; yet the use of gardens seems to have been the most ancient and most general of any sorts of possession among mankind, and to have, preceded those of corn or of cattle as yielding the easier, the pleasanter, and more natural food. As it has been the inclination of Kings and the choice of philosophers, so it has been the common favourite of public and private men; a pleasure of the greatest, and the care of the meanest; and indeed an employment and a possession, for which no man is too high nor too low.

Sir William Temple (1628 - 1699)

The way our tradition discusses the commandment to shoo away the mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks has aroused opposite attitudes among the rishonim (Ramban vs Rambam) towards the very reason for the mitzva. On the one hand it forms the basis for those who believe its purpose was to instill in humans the same kindness to animals demonstrated in the command (Ramban) whereas others felt this mitzva merely reflects whatever all other commandments reflect, the desire to fulfill the will of the creator. The talmud makes use of this very command in its reflection on the nature of prayer. In Berachot and Megillah this very command is used as the paradigm by which God's mercy or decrees are judged or silenced by human description.

The theological implications of the command to shoo away the mother bird became the trigger or the litmus test by which this theological crisis was expressed. It was discussed by Rabbi Siev in the following passage in Talmud Berachot and Megillah:

משנה. האומר תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף כה עמוד א יברכך טובים - הרי זו דרך המינות. על קן צפור יגיעו רחמך ועל טוב יזכר משנה. האומר תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף כה עמוד א יברכך טובים - הרי זו דרך המינות. על קן צפור יגיעו רחמך ועל טוב יזכר שמך, מודים מודים - משתקין אותו. המכנה בעריות - משתקין אותו, האומר: +ויקרא י"ח+ ומזרעך לא תתן להעביר למלך - לא תתן לאעברא בארמיותא - משתקין אותו בניזיפה. גמרא. בשלמא מודים מודים - דמיחזי

כשתי רשויות, ועל טוב יזכר שמך נמי, דמשמע: על טוב - אין, ועל רע - לא, ותנן: חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שהוא מברך על הטובה. אלא, על קן צפור יגיעו רחמך מאי טעמא? פליגי בה תרי אמוראי במערבא: רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר זבידא, חד אמר: מפני... שמטיל קנאה במעשה בראשית, וחד אמר: מפני שעושה מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא רחמים, ואינן אלא גזרות.

The gemara analyzes the instances in which the mishna writes that one should be silenced. The case of modim- modim refers to one who doubles the first word of the 17th b'racha of shemona esrei, that of modim (which can be translated as "we thank" or "we acknowledge"). The gemara understands immediately that one who doubles this word appears to address two different beings, which is clearly inappropriate in light of the fact that there is only one God. The gemara is similarly unbothered by the fact that we silence one who says "on good things shall Your name be mentioned," because we know that one must bless Hashem even in unfortunate circumstances.

The gemara is bothered by the fact that we silence one who says "Your mercy extends to the bird's nest." The reference here is to the mitzvah of shiluach ha-ken, that one must send away the mother bird before taking her eggs (Devarim 22:6). This does in fact seem to be an act of mercy so that the mother bird need not witness the taking of her eggs. The gemara therefore questions why someone who mentions this should be silenced.

The gemara presents two answers to this question:

- 1) This injects jealousy into creation, by implying that Hashem has more mercy for birds than for other of His creations. A possible explanation of the gemara's first answer is that it is important for us human beings to understand that God's mercy extends to all of His creations. If we keep emphasizing the compassion that Hashem has for birds, we may fool ourselves into believing that there is something special about the birds rather than understanding that this mitzvah reflects Hashem's general compassion for all of His creations.
- 2) The gemara's second answer is that this statement makes Hashem's attributes mercy, while they

are in reality decrees. ("Attributes" here seems to refer to mitzvot.) This statement seems to imply that there are no specific reasons for mitzvot in general. The purpose of mitzvot is simply to give us an opportunity to follow Divine commands.

האומר על קן ציפור יגיעו רחמין, ועל טוב יזכר שמך, מודים מודים--משתקין אותואלא על קן צהאומר על קן ציפור יגיעו רחמין, ועל טוב יזכר שמך, מודים מודים--משתקין אותואלא על קן צפור יגיעו רחמין מ"ט פליגי בה תרי אמוראי במערבא רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר זבידא חד אמר מפני שמטיל קנאה במעשה בראשית וחד אמר מפני שעושה מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא רחמים ואינן אלא גזרות

Berachot 33b The topic of sending away the mother bird, in parshat Ki Teitzei, Shadal writes:

כי יקרא קן צפור לפניכי יקרא קן צפור לפניך
: כשאדם קרב אל הקן, אלמלא רחמיה על בניה היתה האם נמלטת לנפשה ועוזבת אפרוחיה, אבל היא מאהבתה את בניה תשליך את נפשה מנגד ותעמוד שם להצילם ולא תברח למלט את נשפה. על כן אין ראוי לקחתה, שאם יהיה אדם לוקחה, יהיה מעשה הצדקה והאהבה שאהבה את בניה גורם לה רעה. והנה המכוון במצווה הזאת היא לכבד המידות

הטובות ולקבוע בלבותינו כי לא יצא מצדקה הפסד, שאם היה מותר לקחת האם תחת אהבתה את בניה, היה מתרשם בלב האדם כי החמלה ענין גרוע ומנהג שטות הגורם רעה לבעליו, ועכשו שלקחתה אסורה לנו, יקר תפארת מידת

החמלה יוחק בלבנו חיקוי עמוק.

Shadal's explanation is related, but not exactly identical. This is not an aspect of Hashem, and people, showing mercy -- not taking the em with the banim. But it is to reinforce the idea of mercy, and to make sure that this attribute is not degraded in your eyes. Generally, a bird would flee when you approach the nest. But here, the em is rovetzet over it, in order to protect her children. You might take advantage of this, in order to capture the mother bird as well. But then, the idea would be engraved in the heart of man that mercy is a lowly matter and a silly custom, which causes evil to those who practice it. Therefore, taking the mother bird was prohibited to us, so that the attribute of chemla should be engraved deeply in our hearts.

MISHNA 'MAY THE GOOD BLESS THEE', THIS IS A CUSTOM OF HERESY. [IF HE SAYS], 'MAY THY MERCIES REACH THE NEST OF A BIRD', 'MAY THY NAME BE MENTIONED FOR WELL-DOING', 'WE GIVE THANKS, WE GIVE THANKS', HE IS SILENCED. IF HE INTRODUCES EUPHEMISMS INTO THE PORTION DEALING WITH FORBIDDEN MARRIAGES, HE IS SILENCED. IF HE SAYS, [INSTEAD OF] 'AND THOU SHALT NOT GIVE ANY OF THY SEED TO SET THEM APART TO MOLOCH', 'THOU SHALT NOT GIVE TO TRANSFER IT TO A GENTILE WOMAN', HE IS BOTH SILENCED AND REBUKED.

GEMARA. We understand the prohibition of saying 'WE GIVE THANKS, WE GIVE THANKS', because he seems to be addressing two Powers; also of 'THY NAME BE MENTIONED FOR WELL-DOING', because this implies, for good, yes, for evil, no, and we have learnt, 'It is the duty

of a man to bless [God] for evil in the same way as he blesses for good'. But what is the reason for prohibiting, 'MAY THY MERCIES REACH THE NEST OF A BIRD'? — Different answers were given by two Amoraim in the West [Palestine], R. Jose b. Abin and R. Jose b. Zebida. One said, it is because he creates jealousy in the work of the creation, and the other says it is because he makes the commands of the Holy One, blessed be He, acts of grace, whereas they are only decrees. A certain man went down [before the ark] in the presence of Rabbah and said, 'Thou hast shown pity to the nest of a bird, do thou have pity and mercy on us'; (Thou hast shown pity to an animal and its young, do thou have pity and mercy on us). Said Rabbah: How well this Rabbi knows how to placate his Master! Said Abaye to him: But we have learnt, HE IS SILENCED? — Rabbah only wanted to sharpen Abaye's wits.

Talmud Megila 25a

This passage deals with prayer and praise of the divine with aspects of the laws and commandments dealing with the treatment of the mother bird and shooing her away prior to taking her young. The use of this command as a paradigm of God's mercy is hotly debated by the amoraim who agree it is inappropriate but for differing reasons. Rashi (Berachos 33:) explains that shiluach hakan is not intended necessarily to teach mankind pity, but is solely a decree from Hashem. These decrees govern even seemingly insignificant, and perhaps even implausible, life situations; nevertheless they must be adhered to. Man is merely a servant of Hashem, and a servant must follow his Master's orders blindly.

The Rambam (Hilchos Tefilah 9:7) reaffirms Rashi's teaching by pointing out that if the Torah's intent were to teach man to have pity for animals, how then could ritual slaughter be permitted? It is now difficult to comprehend a seemingly contradictory statement by the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim (Guided to the Perplexed) 3:48. He writes that the reason for the commandment to release the mother bird, and not to kill it and its young in one day, is to warn mankind against undue distress against animals under such circumstances. It is patently unfair, unjust, that the mother bird should be made to suffer simply because she demonstrates mercy and loyalty to her young. She could have abandoned them and left them on their own. Instead, she elected to remain attached to her offspring and resolutely watch over them. In recognition of her devotion, the Torah commands us regarding the mitzvah of shiluach hakan.

The Sefer Hachinuch dealing with Shiluach Hakan quotes verbatim from the Ramban's commentary on the Mitzvah of Shiluach Hakan, where the Ramban raises the same issue. The Ramban first quotes from Maimonides in Guide to the Perplexed, whose position is that the two quoted positions are in fact at odds with each other with respect to the basic question of whether or not we are supposed to look for the underlying reasons of the Mitzvos.

Maimonides conclusion, according to the Ramban is that we are to, and do indeed, follow the opinion that we are supposed to seek out reasons for the performance of the Mitzvos. The Ramban disagrees with Maimonides. The Ramban suggests that to state that G-d is merciful (or, for that matter, any other specific character trait) would impose a "limit" on the limitless Creator. The Ramban therefore explains that there is no contradiction between the injunction against attributing mercy to G-d and the obligation upon us to learn mercy from Shiluach Hakan. We are not to learn from the mitzvah of Shiluach Hakan that G-d is merciful because that is limiting and perhaps blasphemous (precisely because it is limiting). G-d in His infinite wisdom has decreed, however, that we are to be merciful and He has provided us with mitzvos such as Shiluach Hakan (and the prohibition of slaughtering a cow and its calf on the same day, among others) in order to teach us the attribute of mercy. The Ramban emphasizes that there is no contradiction between our learning

the attribute of mercy from Shiluach Hakan and our being warned lest we attribute mercy to G-d as an intrinsic character trait.

It is of great surprise then that the very debate as to the appropriateness of the reward for this command should then have tried Elisha ben Avuya and more so been the very cause of his apostasy. His turn from Phariseic Judaism to apostasy we are told, was concerned with an experience (in one textual tradition) of this very commandment of shooing away the mother bird. The Bible gives the reward for its fulfillment as one of long life and this along with the sixth command of the Decalogue (honoring parents) is quite unique with no other rewards being that of longevity.

And what was the moment that prompted this rebellion?

They said that once he was sitting and learning Mishnah in the valley of Ginosar and he saw a man who had gone up to the top of a palm tree on Shabbat and taken the mother bird away from her chicks and he descended safely. At the end of Shabbat he saw another man who climbed to the top of a palm tree and took the chicks having sent away the mother bird, but when he came down a snake bit him and he died.

He said: It is written You shall certainly shoo away the mother and then take the chicks for yourself in order that it might go well with you and that you live a long life (Deuteronomy 22:7). Where is the good for this man and where is his length of days?

This experience of divine injustice where God promised longevity and rewarded the child who had performed the two very commandments where longevity was promised, with death was too much for him. Where did Elisha turn to after experiencing this horrific episode? I believe the word Apikorus points us towards the school of Epicurus. In the following Midrash the ambivalent attitude of the tradition is fully exposed towards this most enigmatic of its students Elisha ben Avuya. He is fascinating because his arguments and theological diatribes seem most consistent with the Greek school of rhetoric known as Epicurean, after its master Epicurus. If this be so then we have the textual remains of a unique discourse regarding the divine justice and man within our own tradition. I wish to explore this further and will begin with the Midrash concerning his discourse with his star pupil Rabbi Meir.

Stay for the night. Then, in the morning, if he will redeem you, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to redeem you, I will redeem you myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning

(Ruth 3:13).

Rabbi Meir was sitting and teaching in the Bet Midrash in Tibereas, when Elisha, his teacher, cut through the street on horseback, on Shabbat. They said to Rabbi Meir, Elisha your teacher has cut through the street. He went out to Elisha who said to him, what were you engaged in? He said: And the Lord blessed Job more at the end than at the beginning (Job 42:12). He said to him: And what did you say regarding this? Rabbi Meir replied: Blessed means that he doubled Job's wealth. Elisha said to him: Akiba your master did not teach that. Rather: The Lord blessed Job at the end more than at the beginning means that Job was blessed [in the end] because of the teshuvah and good deeds that he accomplished at the beginning.

Elisha said to him: What else did you teach? Better is the end of a matter than the beginning (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

Elisha said: And what did you say concerning this? Rabbi Meir replied: Let's say you have a situation where one purchases some merchandise in his youth and it loses value but in his old age it becomes valuable and he profits by it. Another interpretation of Better is the end of a matter than its beginning: Let's say there is someone who does evil deeds in his youth but in his old age he does good deeds.

Another interpretation of Better is the end of a matter than its beginning: Let's say you have a person who learned Torah in his youth and forgot it but in his old age he returns to it. Here are examples of Better is the end of matter than its beginning. Elisha replied: Akiba your master did not teach that way. Rather: Better is the end of a matter when it is good from the beginning. And here is my story: Abuyah, my father, was one of the great ones of his generation. When it came time for my brit milah, all of the dignitaries of Jerusalem came, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua among them. And while they were eating and drinking some were singing ballads and some were making up alphabetical ditties. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Joshua: They are engaged in their pass times Let us be engaged in ours. They began with Torah verses and linked the Torah verses to Prophet verses and linked the prophet verses to Writings verses. And the very words were as joyful as when they had been given at Sinai and the fire licked up around them. For wasn't the essence of their presentation at Sinai fire according to what is said: And the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven (Deuteronomy 4:11)? My father said: Since the power of Torah is so great, if this son survives I will give him to Torah. And because his intent was not for the sake of heaven, but for the sake of power, the Torah within me did not survive.

Elisha continued to question Rabbi Meir: And what other verse did you expound? Gold and glass cannot equal it (Job 38:17). He replied: These things, gold and glass, are words of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as vessels of gold and as easily lost as glass. Elisha said to him: Akiba your teacher did not teach that way. He said that just as vessels of gold and glass can be fixed if they are broken, just so, a sage who loses his Torah is able to return to it.

Rabbi Meir said to him: Then you should return. He replied: Why? Elisha now changed the subject: Just here is the Shabbat boundary. Rabbi Meir said: How do you know? Said Elisha: My horse's hoof beats tell me that he has already walked two thousand cubits. Rabbi Meir said: You have all of this knowledge and yet you will not return. Elisha said: It is beyond my power.

Rabbi Meir asked: Why? Elisha replied: I was riding on my horse traveling behind the synagogue on Yom Kippur which happened to be on Shabbat. I heard a Bat Kol break forth and say: Return you backsliding children (Jeremiah 3:14); Return to me and I will return to you (Malachai 3:7) —all except for Elisha ben Abuyah who knew my power yet rebelled against me. And what was the moment that prompted this rebellion?

They said that once he was sitting and learning Mishnah in the valley of Ginosar and he saw a man who had gone up to the top of a palm tree on Shabbat and taken the mother bird away from her chicks and he descended safely. At the end of Shabbat he saw another man who climbed to the top of a palm tree and took the chicks having sent away the mother bird, but when he came down a snake bit him and he died.

He said: It is written You shall certainly shoo away the mother and then take the chicks for yourself in order that it might go well with you and that you live a long life (Deuteronomy 22:7). Where is the good for this man and where is his length of days?

Now, he did not know that Rabbi Akiba had given a public derasha: In order that it might go well with you means in the world that is all good; and you shall live a long life means in the world that is as long as eternity. And there are some who say that the reason for his rebellion is that he had seen the tongue of Rabbi Judah the baker in the mouth of a dog. He said: If the tongue that labored in the Torah all of its days is treated like this, a tongue that is not cunning and does not labor in the Torah, how much more so. He said: If this is the case, then there is no reward for the Tzadikim or for the Scholars. And some say that the root of his rebellion was that when his mother was pregnant with him she passed by idolatrous temples, smelled some of the sacrifices which they offered her and she ate and it spread through her belly like the venom of insects.

Some time later, Elisha ben Abuyah became ill and they came and told Rabbi Meir: Elisha, your teacher is ill. He went to see him. Rabbi Meir said to him: You should return. Elisha answered: After all of this, will they accept me? Rabbi Meir said: Is it not written: You return [tashev] a person to dust (Psalm 90:3) which means, even to the point that a life is ground to the dust one can return. Elisha ben Abuya cried and died.

Rabbi Meir rejoiced and said: It seems to me that my teacher departed in a moment of Teshuvah/return. When they buried him, fire came and burned his grave. They came and told Rabbi Meir: Your teacher's grave is burning. He went out and spread his tallit over Elisha's grave. Rabbi Meir said to him: Stay for the night. Then, in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem (Ruth 3:13). Then, in the morning—that is to say, in the world that is all good, if the good one will redeem you, let him redeem—this is the Blessed Holy one, as it is said: The Lord is good to all (Psalm 145:9). But if he does not want to redeem you, I will redeem you myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning (Ruth 3:13) and the fire died down.

Rabbi Meir's students asked him: Master, in the World to Come, if they say to you, "Whom do you desire, your father or your teacher," what will you answer? He said: First my father and then my teacher. They said to him, and will they listen to your request? He replied: Is there not a Mishnah which speaks to this? The case of a scroll may be saved together with the scroll and the case of the Tefillin together with the Tefillin (Mishnah Shabbat 16:1)? Elisha will be saved by the merit of his Torah.

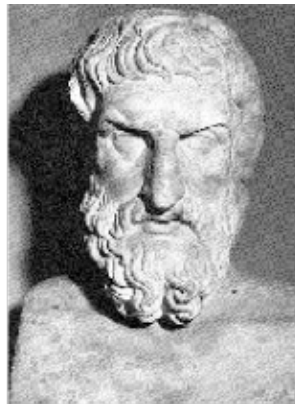
Sometime later the daughters of Elisha came to beg alms from Rabbi Judah HaNasi. He cited the verse: Let there be none to extend kindness to him; neither let there be any to be gracious to his fatherless children (Psalm 109:12). They said to him: Master, do not pay attention to his acts, pay attention to his Torah. At this, Rabbi Judah HaNasi wept and ordered that they should be given a stipend. He said: If one whose Torah was not for the glory of God produced such children how much more so he whose Torah was for the glory of God? In this most profoundly touching story I am most moved by the loyalty of Rabbi Meir and the honesty by which Elisha lived his life. His turn to apostasy and apikorsus was based on his lived experience and his reaction to divine indifference. Where did he turn? I believe he turned to the philosophy of Epicurus in which the divine is indifferent to the world and human suffering. Who was this man who so attracted Elisha?

In 307/306 BCE the Athenian philosopher Epicurus bought a house with a garden just outside Athens along the road from the Dipylon gate to the Academy (Cicero, *De Finibus* 5.1.3). Other great founders of philosophical schools had chosen public areas for their teaching: Plato established his school near the Academy, Isocrates and Aristotle taught in the Lyceum, Zeno often met his students in the Stoa Poecile. In contrast, Epicurus' hedonistic and materialistic philosophy flourished and grew amidst the privately owned groves of his Garden. The Garden itself - apart from the city, a private space, and pleasurable - became a symbol for the detachment and hedonism of the

Epicurean school. Nothing of the Garden's layout is known, but its closeness to the canalized Eridanus River must have provided plentiful water for irrigation of its trees and plants. After Epicurus' death the Garden was passed down to his followers (Diogenes Laertius, 10.10 and 10.17). We may imagine that Epicureans seeking relief from the disturbances of the city gathered in the Garden's groves for many centuries.

Epicurus

It was in Athens where Epicurus's philosophy reached its mature form and Epicureanism was systematically propagated throughout the Hellenistic world. In carrying on this activity, Epicurus's previous clashes with authority convinced him that it was best to stay out of politics and avoid playing to popular prejudices. Instead of trying to win over whole cities and nations as had previous philosophers, Epicurus instead aimed at attracting individuals to an Epicurean subculture while observing the religious and legal forms of the larger society (an important consideration in an era when philosophers were routinely executed or exiled for impiety) and developing an attitude of tolerance towards non-Epicureans. The Garden had a carefully designed program of advertising and education to attract and instruct students, and those who accepted Epicurean teachings were encouraged to formally proclaim their Epicurean identity, build friendships with each other, revere the founders of the Garden as role-models, and celebrate specifically-Epicurean festivals. It was in this environment that close friendships and his unusually Leontion, the author of a tract against Theophrastus) and slaves into his inner circle in sharp contrast to the elitist orientation of the Academy and the Lyceum. Later detractors tried to arouse prejudice against Epicureans by accusing them of licentiousness and over-indulgence, but first-hand testimony portrayed Epicurus as having “unsurpassed goodwill to all men” and very warm relations with his family and a devoted circle of followers. One hostile biographer admits that Epicurus even provided rations to his followers when Athens was besieged, demonstrating his doctrines



aimed at attracting individuals to an observing the religious and legal important consideration in an era executed or exiled for impiety) and tolerance towards non-Epicureans. designed program of advertising and students, and those who accepted encouraged to formally proclaim friendships with each other, revere role- models, and celebrate

Epicurus came to be known for his liberal attitudes, even allowing Leontion, the author of a tract

about friendship through actual practice and not just through mere rhetoric. The true spirit of the Garden can also be judged by an inscription on the gate that greeted those entering it:

“Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure. The caretaker of that abode, a kindly host, will be ready for you; he will welcome you with bread, and serve you water also in abundance, with these words: ‘Have you not been well entertained? This garden does not whet your appetite; but quenches it.’”

The literary output of Epicurus and his closest associates was quite extensive, with at least 42 different works of Epicurus being widely circulated (including the monumental *On Nature* in 37 books, of which only a few fragments have survived) along with 12 books of Metrodorus and 4 books of Polyaeus. Epicurus's original writings were said to fill 300 rolls, unmatched any other philosopher of ancient times.

Epicurus died in 270 B.C. of a painful urinary blockage and an associated dysentery infection. In the last few hours of his life he wrote a moving *Letter to Idomeneus* where he rates the pleasures of the remembrance of his friendship with him ahead of the pains he was suffering. He met his end when

he entered a bronze bath of lukewarm water and asked for some wine, which he swallowed and then with his last breath urged his followers to remember his doctrines: "Farewell my friends, the truths I taught hold fast."

I believe that the rabbinic tradition of the Four who entered the Pardes, which tradition refers to the garden of esoteric wisdom of kabbalah may have signified the orchard/ garden of Epicurus. It would explain a number of issues I hope to raise in this essay. Let us begin with the tradition of Acher otherwise an acronym for Elisha ben Avuyah. A colleague of Rabbi Akiva and master of Rabbi Meir, I believe he holds the key to the rabbinic hostility to Greek philosophy and championed by the new interpretive strategies of Rabbi Akiva. Elisha himself was drawn to Epicurus precisely because his hermeneutical device for reading texts was a literal one and the Torah's promise of longevity for the Mother bird and Honoring parents commandments were to be taken at face value. When that did not occur the most proximate philosophy that embodied the disinterest of the gods in human affairs (as well as reward and punishment as a corollary) was that of the Greek School of Epicurus.

Let us quote from the Jewish Encyclopedia for an historical review of this enigmatic soul.

ELISHA BEN AVUYAH, tanna, quoted once in the Mishnah as saying: "Learning in youth is like writing with ink on clean paper, but learning in old age is like writing with ink on blotted paper" (Avot 4:20). From the position of this saying toward the end of the fourth chapter (see: *Avot, Structure) – after R. Jacob and R. Shimon ben Eleazar and before R. Eleazar Hakapar – it would seem likely that he was one of the very last of the tannaim. In the talmudic tradition (TJ, Hag. 2:1, 77b) he was identified with "Aḥer" ("the Other"), the third of the four companions who "entered the pardes." In the earliest form of this baraita (Tosef., Hag. 2:3, cod. Vienna), this third companion was named explicitly as "Elisha." Elisha is a relatively rare name among the tannaim, and this probably contributed to the identification of these two figures. From the story in Tosefta Hagigah, it seems clear that the Elisha mentioned there was a contemporary of R. Akiva. Beyond what is told in Avot and in Tosefta Hagigah, tannaitic sources provide no additional information on either of these two figures.

Chapter 24 in Avot de-Rabbi Natan version A ascribes various statements to Elisha ben Avuyah. However, Avot de-Rabbi Natan in the forms in which we possess it is a post-talmudic work, and these specific traditions are variously ascribed to other Sages in other sources.

Tosefta Hagigah tells us that Elisha "looked and destroyed the plants." "Destruction of plants" is a standard phrase in tannaitic sources for wanton destruction. It can refer either to damage caused to oneself or to damage caused to another (BK 8:6). In later sources it is used by extension to refer to the destructive consequences of sin (Gen. R. 19), and specifically to one who learns Torah but does not fulfill its precepts (Deut. R., ed. Lieberman, 109). In the Palestinian tradition two related interpretations of Elisha's "destruction of the plants" are suggested. According to one interpretation (TJ, Hag. 2:1, 77b–c; Ruth R. 6; Eccles. R. 7), Elisha himself stopped learning Torah and gave up observing the Sabbath. In this tradition Elisha is viewed as a tragic figure, who has strayed from the ways of the Torah and is convinced that there is no way back. In response to R. Meir's repeated attempts to convince him to repent, Elisha states: "Once I was passing by the Holy of Holies riding on my horse on the Day of Atonement which fell on the Sabbath, and I heard a heavenly voice coming from the Holy of Holies, which said: 'Return, O children' – except for Elisha ben Avuyah." This interchange, which provides the thematic framework for this entire narrative tradition, reflects a literary reversal of R. Meir's own position in Tosefta Demai 2:9, where R. Meir states that a sage

who has abandoned the ways of the ḥavurah "can never be accepted back" into the fold, while R. Shimon and R. Joshua ben Korḥah state that he can always be accepted back, as it is written (Jer. 3:14): "Return, O repentant children." This theme of the "sinful sage", as developed in the Jerusalem Talmud and the parallel Midreshei aggadah, has no obvious connection to the story of the "four who entered the pardes." In response to the question of what led to Elisha's apostasy, this tradition provides a number of answers. Two of them relate to the impure nature of Elisha's conception and birth, and two to Elisha's crisis of faith concerning the suffering of the righteous (e.g., seeing the tongue of R. Judah ha-Nahtom in a dog's mouth, regarding which he commented: "Is this the Torah and this its reward?" (TJ, Hag. ibid.), cf. the parallel description of the tongue of Huzpit the Meturgeman being dragged along by a pig in the Babylonian Talmud (Kid. 39c), concerning which Elisha exclaimed: "The mouth that uttered pearls licks the dust,"). Since none of these reasons seem to have any connection to what Elisha may have "seen" when he entered the pardes (however this is understood, see below for my explanation), the later Palestinian tradition (Song R. 1) omitted the word "looked" from the original text of the baraita, reading instead: "Elisha destroyed the plants." According to this tradition his experience in the pardes was not the cause of his apostasy. Rather the underlying causes of both his apostasy and of his negative experience in the pardes were the flaws in his character and the weakness of his faith.

Another early Palestinian interpretation of Elisha's "destruction of the plants" is also found in the Jerusalem Talmud (TJ, Hag. 2:1, 77b) and echoed in Song R. 1. According to this understanding, Elisha did not merely bring damage upon himself by ceasing to learn Torah and to observe the Sabbath. He also inflicted damage upon others, by forcing them to desecrate the Sabbath, or by preventing children from learning Torah, or even – according to an extreme version of this tradition – killing children who learned Torah. Clearly this tradition does not portray Elisha as a tragic figure, but rather as an arch-villain, deserving no sympathy, but rather only contempt and hatred. It is therefore significant to note that only in this tradition does the Jerusalem Talmud use the term "Aḥer" to refer to Elisha, thus avoiding referring to him by name. R. Meir also does not appear in this tradition, nor is there any discussion of his repentance or his return to the fold (cf. Tosef., Yoma 4:11).

In the Babylonian Talmud (Hag. 15a–b) these two very different early aggadic traditions were combined into a single composite, but fairly continuous narrative. Elisha both sins against himself and commits crimes against others. He is simultaneously a sympathetic and tragic figure, accompanied by his still devoted disciple R. Meir, and given consideration by sages like R. Johanan, yet at the same time an arch-villain, never referred to by his own name, but rather only as "Aḥer" – "the Other" – and clearly despised by R. Judah ha-Nasi. But the most important change in the Babylonian tradition is in fact a return, in part, to the earliest forms of the Elisha tradition, namely the connection between his apostasy and the experience of the pardes. No doubt basing itself on the original tradition of Tosefta Hagigah, the Babylonian Talmud assumes that Elisha's "destruction of the plants" was a direct result of what he saw when he entered the pardes ("Elisha looked and destroyed the plants"). Moreover, the Babylonian Talmud assumes (probably correctly) that the original story of the entry into the pardes as described in the Tosefta reflects a mystical journey, involving an ascension (physical or spiritual) into the heavens, and a vision of some aspect of divinity. The clarification of the precise nature of the tannaitic understanding of the mystical ascent to the divine, and of the dangers inherent in this ascent, are therefore crucial to any appreciation of the roots and development of the Elisha traditions. In their present form, the Babylonian Talmud's version of these traditions reflects a relatively late stage in the evolution of the Metatron traditions, and shows some degree of interdependence with the later strata of the heikhalot literature. Given

the composite character of the Elisha traditions, it is quite clear that any attempt to write a single consistent and coherent "biography" of this character will ultimately break down in contradiction.

As mentioned above, one of the reasons given for Elisha's apostasy was his loss of faith in divine reward and punishment. The Jerusalem Talmud (Ḥag. 2:1, 77b) tells that Elisha once saw a man ascend to the top of a date palm, take the young birds without sending off the mother, and came down safely, despite the fact that he had transgressed the law of the Torah (cf. Deut. 22:7). The next day, Elisha saw another man ascend to the top of a date palm, send off the mother and then take the young birds, thus fulfilling the law of the Torah. When he came down, he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died. Elisha was distressed because the Torah explicitly promises that one who fulfills this commandment will be given "goodness and length of days," and so he lost his faith.

To this the Jerusalem Talmud adds that Elisha lost his faith only because he was unaware of R. Jacob's interpretation of the verse: "'you shall receive goodness' – in the world to come, which is all good; 'you shall receive length of days' – in the future world, which is 'long' [i.e., unending]." This dictum is brought in the name of R. Jacob (b. Korshai) in Tosefta Ḥullin 10:16, a text which also includes a story about a man who ascended a tree, etc. In the context of the Babylonian Talmud's discussion of R. Jacob's position (Kid. 39b; Ḥul. 142a), it brings a dictum of Rav Joseph, which states: "If Aḥer had only interpreted this verse like R. Jacob the son of his daughter, he would not have sinned."

WHAT IS SO AMAZING ABOUT THIS STORY IS THE VERY NOTION THAT HAD HE ONLY BEEN EXPOSED TO THE TEACHINGS OF NON-LITERAL READINGS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT HE WOULD HAVE NOT BECOME AN APOSTATE!

For me reading is violent and has lethal consequences! Reading practices affect one's worldview and relationship to the divine! To be confined to the literal is to be imprisoned in the fossilized artifacts of a previous generation's inspiration.

One tradition has the story of the Four who entered Pardes as the cause for his apostasy, a claim that modern scholars have all but refuted on literary grounds. So what took place when the four entered the garden? What debate? What experience that left all four marred for life? I believe it was a clash with the power and the rhetoric of the Epicurean school. This propounded divine indifference to the suffering of man above all and this must have struck the deepest chord in these holy rabbis. They too were suffering under the hegemony of a punitive power in Palestine and like their colleagues were trying to make theological sense of all of this destruction as recorded in the midrashim of the era. The notion of Greek philosopher Epicurus that God is unable to remedy suffering although willing to do so, is considered in the context of indiscriminate suffering by good people. It is suggested that humanists acknowledge that man faces the consequences of his own deeds, and that they have to remedy their suffering without including the idea of a good loving caring God in their philosophy.

Epicurus then forced our four rabbis to confront an indifferent universe and challenged their long-held belief in the goodness of God and His care especially for his chosen people. I would like to add that the very story of mitzvah of honoring parents and shooing away the mother bird was the very trigger for Elisha's apostasy, precisely because it defied the very claim of the biblical text to long life. This passage betrays the very uncertainty the talmud recorded when a devotee made mention of God's mercy extending to this very commandment. The talmud instructs us to silence such a declaration precisely because the command to shoo away the mother bird is ambivalent as to its

motive. The commandments are divine decrees and this not subject to human judgement and critique, even when they appear merciful to creatures. This is the very example that so affected Elisha in one of the theories propounded by the various midrashim as to the cause of his apostasy. The reward of long life for the fulfillment of this very commandment as well as the command to honor parents were taken literally by Elisha. The Talmud tells us incredulously that had he been aware of Rabbi Akiva's method of non-literal interpretation, his apostasy might have been avoided. What attracted him to Epicurus was the central core of belief that the divine beings are disinterested in human affairs. This paralleled his own experience as to the claim the Torah had promised of longevity but was unfulfilled in front of his eyes.

If the command to shoo away the mother bird has deeper signification for the destiny of God and man then the apostasy of Elisha must be connected to this story at a deeper level. Can we speculate as to the trigger for his apostasy from other textual traditions? Let us return then, to the text of the four who entered the *pardes*/garden to understand what they learned or resisted learning.

The Four Who Entered Paradise

The oldest and most striking reference to the views of Elisha is found in the following baraita (Hagigah 14b; Jerusalem Talmud 2:1):

"Four [sages] entered "pardes" —Ben 'Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Akiva. Ben 'Azzai gazed and died; Ben Zoma gazed and went insane; Aher entered and cut the root (became an apostate); Akiva entered, and exited in peace."

This baraita works through a pun. "Pardes," composed of the four consonants PRDS, is an acronym for the four rules for Biblical exegesis:

* "Peshat" = "simple;" the plain meaning of the text in its immediate context, understanding each word in terms of its common usage. According to Shabbat 63a, a verse never loses its simple meaning.

* "Remez" = "hint;" generalizing the meaning of a verse, so that it functions metaphorically or allegorically.

* "Drash" = "conceptual;" a more detailed exposition or interpretation of the peshat or remez (often by juxtaposing different verses to elicit new meanings), often to make a moral point.¹⁹

* "Sod" = "hidden;" an esoteric or mystical reading of the text. Thus, this baraita could be read to mean that these four sages together sought to achieve an absolute, perfect understanding of the Torah in all its complexity, on all its levels. Some kabbalists see these four methods as stages through which a mystic can use Biblical interpretation to fathom the depths of reality until one has a direct encounter with the divine truth.

"What is the meaning of 'Aher cut the root'? Scripture refers to him (Ecclesiastes 5:5, Avodah Zarah 6) when it says: "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin." What does this signify? In heaven Aher saw Metatron seated while he wrote down the merits of Israel. Whereupon Aher said: 'We have been taught to believe that no one sits in heaven, . . . or are there perhaps two supreme powers?' Then a heavenly voice was heard: "'Repent, O wayward children" (Jeremiah 3:14), with the exception of Aher.'"

The Jewish Encyclopedia suggests that it is probable that Elisha had become a Sadducee. It bases this suggestion on the fact that the Jerusalem Talmud mentions Elisha's betrayal of Pharisee Jews. The Jewish Encyclopedia thus suggests that the antipathy of Elisha was not directed against all forms of Jewish worship existing at that time, but only against Pharisaism, despite the fact the sages

who redacted the Jerusalem Talmud were Pharisees and may have simply focused on the betrayal against their own community. The Jewish Encyclopedia also suggests that the reason given for Elisha's apostasy is characteristic of a Sadducee perspective. Elisha saw how a child had lost his life while simultaneously fulfilling two laws for the observance of which the Torah promised a "long life" (Deuteronomy 22:7), whereas another man who broke the same law was not hurt in the least. This encounter, as well as the frightful sufferings of the martyrs during the Hadrianic persecutions, led him to the conclusion that there was no reward for virtue in this life, contrary to his understanding of Deuteronomy (though the Pharisee sages understood this passage as referring to life and reward in the next world). Apparently, the Jewish Encyclopedia suggests that Elisha was a Sadducee, since belief that reward and punishment must occur on Earth and disbelief in an afterlife are part of Sadducee philosophy. However, his abandonment of Jewish practice after his troubling encounters seems to indicate that, whatever his earlier philosophy, Elisha abandoned any form of Jewish religion.

The Jewish Encyclopedia clearly accepts the account of Jerusalem Talmud as based on reliable tradition, partly because the information therein is confirmed by the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 39b). Just as clearly, the Jewish Encyclopedia rejects the Babylonian Talmud as a reliable source in this matter.

Elisha as "Epicurean"

The harsh treatment he received from the Pharisees was due to his having deserted their ranks at such a critical time. Quite in harmony with this supposition are the other sins laid to his charge; namely, that he rode in an ostentatious manner through the streets of Jerusalem on a Day of Atonement which fell upon a Sabbath, and that he was bold enough to overstep the "tehum" (the limits of the Sabbath-day journey). Both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds agree here, and cite this as proof that Elisha turned from Pharisaism to heresy. It was just such non-observance of customs that excited the anger of Akiva (Sotah 27b).

The same passage from the Jerusalem Talmud refers to Elisha as being alive when his pupil Rabbi Meir had become a renowned teacher. According to the assumption made above, he must have reached his seventieth year at that time. If Elisha were a Sadducee, the friendship constantly shown him by Rabbi Meir could be understood. This friendship would have been impossible had Elisha been an apostate or a man of loose morals, as has been asserted. Sadducees and Pharisees, however, lived in friendly intercourse with one another (for example, Rabban Gamaliel with Sadducees; Eruvin 77b).

In his recent book, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach*, Alon Goshen-Gottstein argues that Rabbinic stories should be read as literature rather than as history: They construct stories that are then integrated into larger ideologically motivated literary units in such a way as to impart particular ideological messages. The sources do not necessarily relate the historical facts about the heroes but they do illustrate the cultural concerns that find expression in the stories told about them ... All this leads to the realization that the significant unit for presentation is not the life of the sage; it is the stories about sages. These stories are not formulated in an attempt to tell the life of the sage. They are told because the sage, as part of the collective culture, has some bearing on the common cultural concerns. Various anecdotes are coupled into a larger story cycle. Rabbinic Judaism was based on vigorous and often contentious debates over the meaning of the Torah and other sacred texts. The challenge facing the Rabbis was to maintain the limits to which a sage could be wrong, without being considered a heretic. Elisha

(and Eleazar ben Aroch) represent two extremes in attitudes towards the Torah; actual rabbis and their debates had to occur somewhere in between these two limits.

Serious disagreements appear, however, in relation to the interpretation of the expression "to enter Pardes." The Hebrew term *pardes* is a Persian or Greek loan word that means literally "garden," "park," or "enclosure," and frequently refers to "paradise" in Rabbinic literature. Early critical scholars, beginning with Graetz, and more recently Maier, Fischel, and Segal, understand the expression allegorically as a reference to the study or practice of Gnosticism. A second group of interpreters, including Bousset, Scholem, Neher, Goldberg, and Gruenwald, interpret it as a reference to the very real psychological dangers of engaging in ecstatic mystical experience. A third group of scholars, including Goshen-Gottstein, Urbach, Halperin, and Dan, on the other hand, understand it as a reference to the proper exposition of biblical literature, particularly the interpretation of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1 (Maaseh Bereshit; the "Work of Creation") and Ezekiel's account of his vision of G-d's throne chariot in Ezekiel 1 (Maaseh Merkavah; the "Work of the Chariot").

For Marvin Sweeney the key to understanding the Four who entered the Pardes lies in their respective typologies. Each of the rabbis represented some particular value or flaw that tradition wished to validate:

"In searching for the cause of Aher's actions, the Babylonian Talmud points to his study of Greek literature or forbidden books: "But what of Aher? — Greek song did not cease from his mouth. It is told of Aher that when he used to rise [to go] from the schoolhouse, many heretical books used to fall from his lap" (bHag 15b). The Jerusalem Talmud relates three reasons, including his observation of arbitrary reward or punishment for two men who took eggs from a mother bird's nest in violation of Deut 22:6-7; his witness of the execution of R. Judah Nahtum by the Romans in which the dead Rabbi's tongue, which had uttered so many beautiful teachings, was carried off in the mouth of dog; and his mother's smelling of pagan incense (yHag 2:1). In each case, the tradition points to reasons for Elisha ben Abuyah's lack of faith in Jewish tradition. This stands behind the narrative in the Jerusalem Talmud which relates Elisha ben Abuyah's apostasy when he succeeded in entering pardes or the throneroom of G-d. Upon seeing G-d's chief angel, Metatron, seated on the divine throne, Elisha ben Abuyah declared "there are two powers (in heaven)!", i.e., there is not one, but two gods. He therefore abandoned the most fundamental teaching of Jewish tradition, i.e., belief in one and only one G-d. When Metatron was punished for his actions, he was also given permission to strike out the merits of Aher. In this regard, the citation of Ecclesiastes/ Qohelet 5:5, "Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin," expresses Elisha ben Abuyah's shortcomings in this narrative. He studied and expressed the ideas of forbidden literature, which led him to question Jewish tradition and eventually to become a heretic by his statements.

"In view of the attention given to Aher's apostasy, it seems clear that he is intended to function as an antitype to the ideal figure of Akiba in the narrative. Akiba is the ideal Rabbinic sage, who not only defines Rabbinic law or halakhah and biblical interpretation or midrash but maintains his adherence to Judaism by dying as a martyr with the words of the Shema on his lips. Elisha ben Abuyah, although he was a Rabbinic sage in his own right, abandoned the most fundamental principle of Judaism, belief in one G-d, as a result of his interest in Greek literature. Consequently, Aher's lack of faith in Rabbinic tradition leads him to outside sources and results in his apostasy. Akiba's adherence to Rabbinic tradition throughout his life and death, on the other hand, demonstrates his faith and qualifies him to experience pardes. Furthermore, Akiba's dying statement of the Shema expresses his adherence to Judaism, whereas Aher's last statement results in his condemnation.

“The situation with Simeon ben Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma is not so clear, however, in that each is honored in Rabbinic tradition. According to the Mishnah, "all the diligent students ceased" when Simeon ben Azzai died, and "there were no more expounders (of the Torah)" when Simeon ben Zoma died (mSotah 9:15). Both are quoted in mAbot 4:1-3, which indicates their status among the most respected of the early Tannaim.

“Despite ben Azzai's stellar reputation as a pious sage, however, Rabbinic tradition indicates that he had one major shortcoming, i.e., he never married and he never produced children. The Babylonian Talmud (YB Yebamot 63b; cf. TP Yeb 8:7) relates a discussion in which R. Eliezer asserts that failure to produce children is like shedding blood, and R. Jacob asserts that it diminishes the Divine image. When ben Azzai combines the opinions of these two Rabbis, stating that the failure to produce children constitutes both the shedding of blood and the diminution of the Divine image, his colleagues object that he preaches well but he does not act well in that he has neither married nor produced children. Ben Azzai's response, "What shall I do, seeing that my soul is in love with the Torah; the world can be carried on by others," is scandalous in that it demonstrates his failure to observe the first and most fundamental halakhah or law in Jewish tradition: "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 9:16). Not only does ben Azzai himself equate such action with the shedding of blood and diminishing the Divine image, but Abba Hanan in the name of R. Eliezer states in the same context that one who fails to produce children deserves the penalty of death.

“There is some indication that R. Akiba's daughter may have followed her mother's example in marrying and supporting ben Azzai (TB Ket 63a), but the tradition is not entirely clear. In any case, it is clear that ben Azzai never had children. Consequently, he never reproduced physically nor did he have children to whom he could pass on his knowledge of Torah. This is in striking contrast to Akiba, whose marriage to Rachel and the birth of his children not only fulfilled the most fundamental command of Jewish tradition, but led him to become one of the greatest sages of Talmudic tradition precisely so he could teach his son. Ben Azzai's failure to reproduce physically corresponds to his punishment upon attempting to enter pardes, i.e., he dies and suffers physical punishment of the body precisely because he failed to fulfill his duty to produce children and to teach them Torah. Furthermore, it explains the citation of Psalm 116:15 in relation to ben Azzai, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." The term "precious" yaqar, is best translated as "costly," and indicates that ben Azzai's lack of children at his death cost the world dearly in lost potential.

“Simeon ben Zoma enjoyed a distinguished reputation as one of the foremost aggadic expounders of Torah, but like his colleague ben Azzai, he was never ordained as a Rabbi. This means that despite his reputation as an aggadic preacher, he never completed his full education in halakhah or Jewish law. This is important in the present context in that the mystical collection in the Babylonian Talmud (bHag) contains various references to ben Zoma's interpretation of scripture, but they demonstrate that he was frequently in error and therefore not a scholar in his own right. A second tradition relates that ben Zoma failed to stand before his teacher R. Joshua ben Hanania because he was so lost in thought, and thereby failed to show proper respect. In either case, the tradition points to the deficiency in his reasoning while interpreting scriptural texts. Again, this presents ben Zoma in striking contrast to R. Akiba. Whereas ben Zoma never completed his ordination and errs repeatedly in biblical interpretation, Akiba defined the very bases of Rabbinic halakhah. It is therefore no accident that ben Zoma goes insane upon his attempt to experience pardes. For lack of a completed education, his mind was not prepared, and he cannot be considered a scholar in his own right. Furthermore, the citation of Prov 25:16 in relation to ben Zoma, "Have you found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for you, lest you be filled and vomit it," is significant here. The throne chariot text in Ezek 3:1-3 portrays the prophet Ezekiel's reception of G-d's words with the imagery of his eating a scroll that tasted like honey. Whereas Ezekiel was capable of understanding

properly the message that he ingested, ben Zoma was not. "Clearly, Simeon ben Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, and Aher or Elisha ben Abuyah each lacks a quality that prevents him from successfully experiencing *pardes*. Furthermore, the scripture citations associated with each somehow expresses his shortcomings. When viewed in relation to R. Akiba, the shortcomings of the three emphasize Akiba's ability to engage in the experience of *pardes* in that he possesses each of the qualities that the other three lack. Unlike Simeon ben Azzai who had no children, Akiba's wife and children prompted him to learn to read and eventually to become a sage. Unlike Simeon ben Zoma who failed to master Rabbinic learning in its entirety, Akiba laid the foundation for Jewish law or *halakhah* and biblical interpretation or *midrash*. Unlike Aher who failed to adhere to Rabbinic tradition and eventually uttered the heretical words that led to his condemnation, Akiba held firm to Judaism up to the moment of his martyrdom, and died with the words of the *Shema* on his lips. Clearly, the Rabbinic legend of the four who entered *Pardes* defines the qualities of one would enter *pardes*. He should be an ideal Rabbinic figure, like R. Akiba.

"In contrast, Simeon ben Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, and Aher or Elisha ben Abuyah all violate Jewish tradition in way or another, and therefore do not understand it or apply it properly. In each case, a verse of scripture, properly interpreted, is applied to express their respective shortcomings. The association of scriptural verses with each Rabbi to express an outstanding characteristic that disqualifies him from entering *pardes*, therefore, highlights the issue of scriptural interpretation, and suggests that the original meaning of the expression, "to enter *pardes*," relates to the proper exposition of scripture. Given the potentially heretical character of much of the mystical, theurgical, and *hekhalot* literature of the early Talmudic period, this suggests that the purpose of the legend concerning the four who entered *pardes* is to attempt to gain some control over the proper exposition of the mystical texts, the account of creation in Genesis 1 (*Ma'aseh Bereshit*) and the account of Ezekiel's vision of G-d in Ezekiel 1 (*Ma'aseh Merkavah*). By defining R. Akiba as the epitome of one qualified to expound upon these texts, the legend attempts to insure that they will be interpreted in accordance with Rabbinic tradition. When considered in relation to the Mishnah's statement that one who would expound the mystical texts be "a sage that understands his own knowledge," i.e., a Rabbi fully versed in Jewish tradition, the story of the four who attempted to enter *pardes* indicates that R. Akiba is the example of the person who is qualified to undertake such an exposition.

Samson Levey has suggested that the four represented the rabbis who entered not *pardes* or garden rather *paradeisos*- a Christian technical term:

"The traditional vocalization of the word is *Pardes*, from the Greek *paradeisos*, meaning "garden," hence, the garden of speculative theosophy, or esoteric philosophy. My hypothesis is that there is a reference to Christianity in this *Baraita*. Assuming that Ben Zoma's dereliction was his adoption of Christianity, which the Rabbis sought to conceal, something startling emerges from this passage. We can retain the consonants of the word *PRDS*, but we must reconsider its vocalization, which had never before been questioned by any Talmudic authorities. I propose that, instead of *Pardes* it be read *Parados*, the Hebrew rendering in apocopated form of the Greek word *Paradosis*, which was the term used extensively by Christians, in the second century and thereafter, to apply to the authoritative tradition or transmission of an authentic doctrine concerning the life of Jesus and the early teachings of the Church, with special reference to the materials which subsequently were incorporated into the writings of the New Testament. What the *Baraita* tells us is that the four made a probing study of Christian origins and beliefs.

"There are four versions of *PRDS*: *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:3,4; B. (Babylonian Talmud or *Bavli*) *Hagigah* 14b; J. (Jerusalem Talmud or *Yerushalmi*) *Hagigah* 77d; and the *Midrash Rabbah*, *Song of Songs*

I:4;1. Of these, the versions of the Yerushalmi and Midrash Rabbah are inaccurate, confusing Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma. The version of the Bavli has Amoraic interpolations, corrupting the original text. From the standpoint of authenticity and literary style, the version of the Tosefta appears to be the simplest and the most accurate, the original source. It reads:

Four entered PRDS, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher and R. Akiba. Ben Azzai caught a glimpse and died. Concerning him Scripture says, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones (hasidim)" (Ps. 116:15).[4] Ben Zoma caught a glimpse and was smitten. Concerning him Scripture says, "If you have found honey eat only as much as you need" (Prov. 25:16). Aher caught a glimpse and mutilated the plants. Concerning him Scripture says, "Do not let your mouth cause your body to sin" (Eccl. 5:5). R. Akiba entered in peace and emerged in peace. Concerning him Scripture says, "Take me along! We would run after you!"

(Song of Songs 1:4).

“In order to understand this Tannaitic passage it must be borne in mind that the proof-texts cited have a significant and direct bearing on the personalities to whom they are applied in this particular context. They are a fitting Scriptural depiction of what happened to these men as a consequence of their investigation of the paradosis. What prompted their probe of Christianity was a fervent search for liberation from Rome and the shackles which it imposed upon Judaea and its tyrannical treatment of the Jewish people. Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and burning of the Temple in 70 C.E. were especially painful and bitter. Versed in Scripture, these sages were looking for the Messianic deliverance divinely promised in the Bible. Christianity then, as now, claimed that the Messianic hope was fulfilled in Jesus. These four sages wanted to see for themselves if there was any validity to the Christian claim, hence their probe of the paradosis. How were they affected by this experience?

“Ben Azzai, according to the text, "glimpsed and died." The proof-text tells us that he died a hasid, a faithful Jew who rejected the Christian claim. However, it is not quite that simple, and requires some elaboration. According to a Rabbinic opinion, one who has been a min, a Christian or other deviant from the Jewish faith, and returns to the fold, is regarded as though he had died and has been restored as a Jew.[5] Accordingly, Ben Azzai toyed with Christianity but was a ba'al t'shuvah, a penitent who died a loyal Jew. “Ben Zoma "glimpsed and was smitten," infected by the paradosis, and became a renegade from Judaism, a Judaeo-Christian. The proof-text is remarkably revealing. "If you have found honey, eat your fill. . . ."The Rabbinic twist of the verse makes it an affirmative statement rather than a question. What does honey have to do with Ben Zoma's defection? Everything! Christian writers of that era mention that an integral element in the ritual of the Christian baptism of converts, consisted of feeding them milk and honey either during or immediately after the baptismal rite. The reference to honey in the proof-text points to Ben Zoma as a min, a Jewish Christian, and explains the meaning of his being "smitten."

“As for Aher, Elisha b. Abuyah, "he mutilated the plants," that is, he sought to induce Jewish youths to stray from the Torah by arguing with them, as the Talmud explains. (TB Hagiga 15a) The proof-text is appropriate: do not let your tongue (power of persuasion) lead your flesh (kin) into sin, as you are sinful with your pagan ideas.

“Akiba entered in peace and emerged in peace, true to the Jewish faith and its teachings, unflinching in his love of God, his dedication to Torah, and his opposition to the Christian contention of Messianic fulfillment. Here, too, the proof-text is most appropriate. R. Akiba exalts the Songs of Songs as a serenade between God and Israel, declaring it to be the most sacred book of the

Hagiographa. (M. Yadayim 3:4) The verse from the Song of Songs is cited as Israel's response to Christianity's attempt to subvert the Jewish people from their traditional religion. Israel favors the direction of R. Akiba towards God's promise of true Messianic redemption. "Take me along! We will run after you!" We will follow R. Akiba; we will remain faithful to the God of Israel!

Sweeney's and Levey's theses point us in the right direction, seeing these historical figures beyond the textual rhetorical and ideological differences and rather a social and theological world they reflected. However rather than positing the idealist figures and archetypes tradition wishes to bestow on such historical figures I would like to suggest that the "four who entered the garden" experienced personal theological crisis as expressed by the crisis of interpretation of the good life promised literally by the bible for the fulfillment of the mother bird command, and the midrash texts reflect each rabbi's solution as manifested by his choice following their singular visit to the pardes or what I believe were differing schools of Greek thought. Akiva is able to survive precisely because he follows the non-literal interpretive method of drush. Thus "long life" as a reward for fulfilling the commandments means the world to come not long life in this world. Elisha's problem would never have arisen, we are told, had he been exposed to this method of interpretation! If only, if we could only believe this, if, if, if! Is it possible he did not know of his very teacher's method of interpretation? And Akiva himself will die a martyr's death one day, and in some sense did not then escape the initiation into the mysteries of the garden, being forced to live and die his very interpretation of biblical texts (all my life I wished to fulfill the words of "love God with all your soul" until now Berachot 61b) non-literally.

Elisha becomes an Epicurean precisely because of his experience of the capricious nature of the divine and the lack of reward for performing the commandments in this world as claimed by the written Torah. In Epicurus he found a rationale for seeing the world as he lived and experienced it. In this sense he lived with integrity and true to his belief in the need to hold even God accountable literally with the words of His Torah.

Ben Azzai's celibacy clues us into his devotion to the school of stoicism. Historian Joseph Swain tells us that, "a wave of asceticism swept over the whole Greek world in the first century BCE." Philosophical schools like the Epicureans and Stoics promulgated celibacy. Stoicism, the greatest school of ancient philosophy, had its most profound impact from 300 BCE to 250 CE. Stoicism naturally lauded celibacy over marriage. A true Stoic like Seneca (d. 65 CE) could write that one "resists the assault of passions and does not allow himself to be swept into the marital act." Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) praised the elephant for mating only every two years! All over the Mediterranean pagan priests observed purity laws, denying themselves sexual intercourse before the sacred ablutions were performed. The Vestal Virgins were honored in Rome and the largest mystery cult of that time, that of Mithras, championed the unmarried state. Was ben Azzai like his colleague Elisha moved by another garden or Greek school?

And ben Zoma, who never matriculated or got ordained, did he not follow this path precisely because his love of torah had to be clean of any personal gain? Despite later rabbinic criticism of his stance and his choice of non legal texts to study, this approach might point us to see him attracted to the mystery cults? This remains hugely speculative!

In each case the midrashic wealth of material shows us their respective theologies as regards suffering and God's indifference or in the case of Akiva the demand for ongoing mesras nefesh or martyrology. Although the rabbis of the talmud were quite clear as to their preference for Rabbi Akiva and his approach, history always honors the victors. The defeated lose their voice quickly!

In the mystical tradition the command to shoo away the mother bird has a deeper resonance and returns to the divine-human relationship albeit in a new key. The mother bird is none other than that aspect of the divine fractured from itself called Schechina, which lies wandering in exile looking for its children, the Children of Israel, lost in exile too. The Zohar picks up this mystical interpretation of the literal text of the mother bird, and asks whatever happened to the mother bird after this wonderful ritual? Surely she comes back to see what befell her chicks or eggs? What happened then? When she returns to find her nest empty, she begins flying from tree to tree to find her missing children, and cries out in anguish each time she is unable to find them. This, says the Zohar, arouses Hashem to take compassion on his Children who are in exile, and bring them back to their "nest" in Eretz Yisrael. The Zohar elsewhere claims she flies out to sea and dashes herself on the rocks! This apparent suicide points to an even greater sense of torture and questioning the so-called divine mercy behind this commandment (as the Ramban suggested.)

In Likutei Halochos, (Hilchos Shiluach Hakan) Reb Nosson discusses this point further: "And this is the aspect of the command to shoo away the mother bird, as is brought in the Tikkunei Zohar and a number of other places that the nest refers to the Schechina as it were, and when a nest happens to appear along the way...this is a hint to the long exile of the Schechina which is exiled from Her place..." "So it behooves each person who 'happens upon a nest along the way' to fix and restore the nest and elevate the Schechina from Her exile ...for She is trapped in the husks in this world..." "For he who merits to recognize God in this bitter exile and merits to believe and know that in truth His kingdom extends to all worlds, that even the husks receive their vitality from Him." From Reb Nosson we learn Reb Nachman's Torah that God is to be found everywhere, even in the lower worlds where the kelippah or husks and defilement exists. Thus the deeper aspect of this commandment is to see Him precisely in the darkness and exile of this lower world. I would add that Elisha's mistake was to not see God's hand in the death of that child, and not to see the suffering Schechina in the exile of suffering and affliction of this world. Reb Nachman and Reb Nosson are teaching us via the Zohar equivalence of the mother bird and nest with schechina that God Himself is exiled alongside us in the dark night of the soul, so our task is to elevate Her i.e. survive and experience His presence in His apparent absence. We chance upon the nest, we sense the divine in exile, and we must hold on to it and rescue it, so to speak, by the very questioning and struggling with the faith of our fathers.

It is the paradox of believing where there is no rational grounds for belief which is key to his theology. In a monistic world where God pervades all the challenge is always to see the divine despite the world. I believe this was the tragic mistake of Reb Elisha ben Avuyah of our textual tradition. In his turn to the philosopher Epicurus he resisted the sensory world as anything other than the visual experiential. He negated the possibility of the paradoxical world of soul and immanence of the Divine.

In rehabilitating Elisha's voice for a post-Holocaust age where the victims who were wedded to a deeply pietistic tradition saw daily young boys following their fathers' commands to fulfil the Torah, yet brutally murdered, and in fulfilling the very commands that promised long life, these aggadic stories ring eerily true. We can no longer afford to keep Elisha and his colleagues "outside". Many survivors remained "adayin bachutz" as did Ben Zoma, many committed suicide as did Ben Azzai, having seen too much. Like Isaac on the altar who sees what cannot be seen, must not be seen, we too have seen too much. Let us rehabilitate these four Rabbis and learn more from their legacy. They too suffered and travelled into mythical places and orchards to seek the truth and meaning in their suffering. Let us no longer judge them ill some two thousand years later. Their life examples may have much to still teach us. May the Rebbe's paradoxical theology of absence be a true tikkun for their failings.