

Pirkei Avot 5:22 **Transformation**

Ben Bag Bag would say: Delve and delve into it, for all is in it; see with it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing better. Ben Hei Hei would say: According to the pain is the reward.

This week we will look at the *mishnah*, which according to some versions of the text is the final *mishnah* of *Pirkei Avot*.¹ The tractate of *Avot* itself consists of 5 chapters. The sixth chapter, referred to as the chapter of “Torah acquisition” (*kinyan Torah*), that appears in the print editions was added later and is a type of collection of similar ethical sayings made by later sages. This is apparent from the sixth chapter’s opening, “The sages taught using the language of the Mishnah....”

Converts

The names Ben Bag Bag (בג בג בג) and Ben Hei Hei (הי הי הי) that appear in our *mishnah* and are not mentioned anywhere else in the Mishnah² and therefore stand out. Some explain³ that the two were non-Jews who converted to Judaism in a period when the government forbade it, so they were given nicknames to keep their identities hidden. According to this explanation, both nicknames allude to the letter *hei* added to the names of Abraham and Sarah: The numerical value of Bag (בג) is 5, the same value as the letter *hei* (ה). Thus, “Bag Bag” (בג בג) equals *hei hei* (ה ה). Of course, the name Ben Hei Hei itself is a direct reference to the letter *hei*.

A Structural Allusion

Among many things, the letter *hei* alludes to the 5 original chapters of the tractate of *Avot*. The Bag of Ben Bag Bag alludes to its internal division into 2 and 3, since the letters that spell Bag (בג) are *beit* and *gimmel* the values of which are 2 and 3. The first two (ב) chapters of *Pirkei Avot* describe the Oral Torah’s development,⁴ while the last three (ג) chapters are collected sayings of the *Tana’im*—the Mishnaic period’s sages—throughout the generations.

The *hei* (הי) of Ben Hei Hei alludes to the structure of tractate *Avot* after the addition of the sixth chapter: Five (ה) chapters and the additional (ס) chapter. The fact that the structure of the tractate is alluded to twice, in the names of both Bag Bag and Hei Hei

¹ In the Alter Rebbe’s *Siddur*, this is the next to last *mishnah*, followed by the *mishnah* that begins with the words, “At five years old to learn Torah.”

² Ben Bag Bag appears in the Talmud, sometimes as Yochanan Ben Bag Bag, as in *Kidushin* 10b.

³ *Midrash Shmuel* in the name of the *Rashbam* brought in the *Tosfot Yom Tov*.

⁴ Beginning with, “Moshe received Torah from Sinai...to the Men of the Great Assembly,” through the pairs, until Hillel and Shamai. After that, the lineage of all the princes from Hillel and back to Hillel (chapter 2:7). Following that, “Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai received from Hillel and Shamai,” with the students of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai, until Rabbi Tarfon, who was also a student of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai. (See Rabbi *Matityah Hayitzhari* and *Mirkevet Hamishnah* at the end of chapter 2).

suggest that it is not enough to learn it once. Instead, their names call upon us to constantly review the teachings, as Ben Bag Bag instructed, “*Delve and delve into it, for all is in it.*”

The literal translation of Ben Bag Bag’s words, “*Delve and delve into it,*” is, “Turn it over and turn it over.” This double flipping over alludes to the *Zohar’s* teaching that true *tzaddikim* (pious individuals) must know how to doubly transform, or turn upside-down, the false reality of the world.⁵ As the *Zohar* states, they know how, “to transform darkness into light and to transform bitterness into sweetness.”⁶

Transforming darkness to light means to elevate the husk of impurity—the negative dimension of all that happens in the world—called *Nogah*, which constitutes the intermediary and transition from the world of holiness to the wholly impure husks of impurity—the reality that seems to be separated from God.⁷ The husk of *Nogah* is the “seam” between holiness and impurity. It can deteriorate into another dimension of complete impurity, but it can also be elevated into a state of holiness with relative ease. Generally speaking, the performance of a *mitzvah* is holiness, while the transgression of a sin becomes a husk of impurity. *Nogah* is the realm of all that is neither necessary and required (a *mitzvah*) nor categorically forbidden. In this sense *Nogah* represents those actions, speech, and thoughts that are permissible. The goal is to take all our daily permissible acts and elevate them to holiness: To eat in order to have strength to learn Torah, to sleep in order to regain our energy to serve God, to study for a profession in order to provide a good income with which to serve God or to use the knowledge itself to serve God or His Torah.⁸

Transforming bitterness into sweetness is a more difficult task because it entails transformation of the impure husk itself, and attaching it to holiness. With the power of our holy Torah, it is possible to elevate even the most inexorable husks into holiness. And who knows that better than Ben Bag Bag, who was a non-Jew who converted and attached himself to the holiness of Israel?

⁵ See the story brought in *Pesachim* 50a about Rav Yosef Ben Ribal.

⁶ As in the words of Rabbi Shimon to the angels (*Zohar* I:4a)

⁷ For more on the husk of *Nogah*, see *Eitz Chayim* 49:4 and *Tanya* chapter 7.

⁸ See *Tanya* chapter 8.