YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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Shiur #23: The Tale of Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu (Part I)

# Introduction

# In the following two *shiurim*, we will continue our recent course of analyzing narratives from *Nezikin*, interwoven in *sugyot* that deal with monetary matters. This time we will discuss an unusual encounter between the *Amora* Rabba bar Avuha and the Prophet Eliyahu, which appears in the penultimate chapter of Tractate *Bava Metzia* in the Babylonian Talmud (114a-b).

# Rabba bar Avuha was a second-generation Babylonian *Amora*, famed for being the teacher of R. Nachman. It appears that he was also his father-in-law.

# Context of the Narrative in the *Sugya*

The *mishna* on 113a (9:13) deals with collateral for a loan, and the subsequent *gemara* discusses various laws related to it. Before the story about Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu is cited (henceforth, “the narrative”),the *sugya* addresses the issue of making arrangements for the debtor (113b-114a): Should the court take into consideration the basic needs of a borrower after defaulting on a loan, or may the lender seize whatever was put up as collateral?[[1]](#footnote-1)

After much discussion and debate, the Talmud cites this story, in which the Prophet Eliyahu gives an explicit and direct answer to this halakhic dilemma.

**The Narrative**

Rabba bar Avuha met Eliyahustanding in a non-Jewish cemetery. He said to him:

1) “Is a means test to be applied in favor of a debtor?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

He replied: “We deduce [the law of] poverty [written here] from that of valuations. With respect to valuations, it is written (*Vayikra* 27:8), ‘But if he be poorer than your valuation […according to the means of him that vowed the priest shall value him],’ while of a debtor it is written (*Vayikra* 25:35), ‘And if your brother grow poorer […then you shall relieve him].’”

2) “From where do we know that a naked man must not separate [*teruma*]?”

“From the verse (*Devarim* 23:15), ‘That He shall see no matter of nakedness among you.’”

3) He said to him: “Are you not a priest?[[3]](#footnote-3) Why are you standing in a cemetery?”

He replied: “Has the Master not studied the laws of purity? For it has been taught that R. Shimon bar Yochai says: Non-Jewish graves do not defile, as it is written (*Yechezkel* 34:31), ‘You are My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are *adam’* — you are referred to as *adam* [to defile others in this manner], but non-Jews are not referred to as *adam*.”

He replied: “I cannot even adequately study the four; can I then study the six?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

He asked him: “And why?”

“I am too hard-pressed,” he answered him.

[Eliyahu] then led [Rabba bar Avuha] into Paradise and said to him: “Remove your robe and collect and take away some of these leaves.” So he gathered them and carried them off.

As he was coming out, he heard a remark: “Who would so eat his [portion in] the World [to Come] as Rabba bar Avuha has done?” So he scattered and threw them away.

Nevertheless, since he had carried them in his robe, it had absorbed their fragrance, and so he sold it for twelve thousand dinarim, which he distributed among his sons-in-law.

**Literary Analysis**

The narrative before us describes an encounter between Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is composed of two parts. The first is a question-and-answer session between the two characters, while the second describes their visit to Heaven.

In the first segment, Rabba bar Avuha seeks guidance from Eliyahu on three topics, the first being means-testing for debtors, as discussed in the *sugya*. The third question is based on the identification of Eliyahu as priest, as Rabba expresses amazement at Eliyahu’s presence in a cemetery.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This causes Eliyahu to challenge Rabba bar Avuha on his unfamiliarity with the rules of ritual purity as codified in the Order of *Taharot*. Rabba bar Avuha pleads poverty; his economic circumstances do not allow him to delve into every corner of Torah study.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the second part of the narrative, Eliyahu transports Rabba bar Avuha to Heaven in order to improve his financial situation from the resources to be found there. However, after Rabba bar Avuha gathers some leaves, he hears a Heavenly Voice declaring that he is reducing his portion in the World to Come, so he returns the leaves. Nevertheless, his robe has absorbed something of the scent of these leaves,[[8]](#footnote-8) which allows him to sell it for a large amount of money, which Rabba bar Avuha then distributes to his sons-in-law.

**Structure of the Narrative**

1. **Introduction: The Cemetery**

The narrative opens with an encounter between Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu in a non-Jewish cemetery. This detail, whose importance is clarified later on in the first section, is surprising in its own right, since this is not the usual location for encountering the Prophet Eliyahu in the literature of *Chazal*.[[9]](#footnote-9) There are numerous stories about sages visiting cemeteries without any connection to Eliyahu, and for the most part, either these visitations have an explicit and defined aim[[10]](#footnote-10) or the graveyard itself fills a central role.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the narrative we are discussing here, the morbid setting ostensibly sets up the third question posed, in which this location is discussed. However, the narrative itself does not tell us why Rabba bar Avuha or Eliyahu go to the cemetery in the first place.

It is possible that the setting in a cemetery has great symbolic significance. Generally speaking, in the literature of *Chazal*, as in Jewish literature and culture throughout the generations, the graveyard has various symbolic meanings, as A. Bar-Levav has shown.[[12]](#footnote-12)

For example, Bar-Levav points to the fact that in various generations, the cemetery has been seen as a gateway between worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead, as well as a communications center between these two worlds.[[13]](#footnote-13) If this is what *Chazal* see in the cemetery,[[14]](#footnote-14) it is natural to find the Prophet Eliyahu there, as he moves between these two worlds.[[15]](#footnote-15) In light of this narrative, it is particularly fitting for the characters to meet in a graveyard, as this may be connected to the journey to Heaven, also known as the Garden of Eden or the World to Come, in the second half of the story.

There may be another symbolic significance to the encounter in the cemetery in the narrative. The cemetery is located outside the city not just in a physical sense, but in terms of consciousness as well. As a location far away from the center of life, the graveyard is a place that attracts those who have been exiled from society for whatever reason, as well as those who find themselves in distress.[[16]](#footnote-16) Such distress is often the result of economic privation. Thus, the setting may be foreshadowing Rabba bar Avuha’s desperate circumstances, which fill a central role in the narrative. This suggestion follows the Amoraic debate in Tractate *Ta’anit*, which focuses on the custom of going out to the cemetery in a time of distress:

Why do they go to the cemetery? With regard to this, there is a difference of opinion between R. Levi bar Chama and R. Chanina. One says: [To signify thereby,] We are as the dead before You. And the other says: In order that the dead should intercede for mercy on our behalf. What is the difference between them? The difference is with regard to going to a non-Jewish cemetery. (Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 16a)[[17]](#footnote-17)

Since in our narrative the cemetery is a non-Jewish one, only the first option is relevant: “We are as the dead before You.” It may be that this statement is connected to the *baraita* cited by the Babylonian Talmud in *Nedarim* 64b, which enumerates paupers among those who are considered dead even while they are living. Poverty is a central issue in the second half of the narrative, as Rabba bar Avuha’s difficult economic circumstances are the focus of the story.

1. **The Three Questions**

The first half of the narrative is focused on the three questions that Rabba bar Avuha asks of Eliyahu. The third question fits in to the flow of the story quite naturally, as it directly relates to a situation described in it: Eliyahu’s being in a cemetery. Moreover, the role of the third question is to expose Rabba bar Avuha’s ignorance of *Taharot* due to his poverty, which serves as a transition to the second half of the narrative.

In practice, we may read the opening of the narrative, which describes the location of the encounter, then skip directly to the third question, and then read the second half of the narrative. This creates a hermetically sealed and comprehensive unit with a unifying theme.

As we have noted, the first two questions appear to be utterly disconnected from the rest of the narrative. The first question relates directly to the discussion of means-testing for debtors debated in the *sugya* in which the narrative is included, but it apparently has no inherent connection to the narrative itself. Similarly, the second question also has nothing to do with the narrative.

It is possible that the original context of this question is in a source from the Land of Israel found in the Jerusalem Talmud or something of that ilk. This second question is actually discussed in the Mishna in *Terumot*:

Five should not separate *teruma*… the mute, the drunk, the naked man, the blind, and one who experienced a seminal emission… (Mishna, *Terumot* 1:6)

The Jerusalem Talmud explains:

The mute, the naked man, and one who experienced a seminal emission [should not separate] because of the blessing…

Abba bar Avin says: Eliyahu — may he be remembered for good! — was once asked by a pious man: “May a naked man recite the Shema?” He replied: [No, as we see from the verse,] “That He shall see no matter (*davar*) of nakedness among you” (*Devarim* 23:15) — no speaking (*dibur*) of nakedness.

Chizkiya taught: This applies whether one wishes to recite [*Shema*] or make a blessing. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumot* 1:6, 40d)

It appears that such a tradition (or one similar to it) is the source on which the second question is based. This hypothesis is strengthened by the similarity between the names of the scholars in each narrative: Abba bar Avin and Rabba bar Avuha.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In any case, the first two questions have nothing to do with the content of the rest of the narrative. It is true that there is no ostensible need to explain the presence of three questions, as this structure is quite common in many stories and in many *sugyot*. However, we should note that the threefold structure in the narrative before us is not characteristic of the genre of tales in which Eliyahu is asked questions by a Torah scholar.

A possible solution for the role of these two questions in the narrative emerges from the fact that each query relates to a different Order of the Mishna. While Rabba bar Avuha confesses later on in the narrative, *“*I cannot even adequately study the four,” these three questions demonstrate his ignorance of three Orders. Rabba bar Avuha’s poverty of knowledge, fueled by his poverty of resources, fills a central role in the plot of the narrative, providing the background for the second part.

It appears that we cannot arrive at a complete and satisfying solution for the role of the first two questions within the closed confines of the narrative itself.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the next *shiur*, as we discuss the position of the narrative within the broader context of the *sugya*, we will consider a number of other hypotheses.

1. **The Poverty**

Rabba bar Avuha’s poverty is a central theme in the narrative, mainly in the second part. The sage’s impoverished circumstances, which have severe consequences on his capacity to study Torah, motivate Eliyahu to take him to the Garden of Eden, where he receives the opportunity to solve the problem. However, when it becomes clear to Rabba bar Avuha that this solution means that he will lose his portion in the World to Come, he changes his mind. Despite this, he benefits from the scent which the Garden of Eden leaves on his robe, and his penury is resolved. The indigence of the sage may be symbolized, literarily, by an additional detail: This robe, which has an important role in the second half of the narrative, may symbolize the proverbial shirt off his back,[[20]](#footnote-20) the most basic item that a person has. Focusing on it highlights his poverty as well; the robe is all he has left. Indeed, this is what we find in the Torah in *Parashat Mishpatim:*

If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. (*Shemot* 22:25-26)

1. **Withdrawing from One’s Account in the World to Come**

The idea that appears in the second part is that if one receives benefit in this world, this eats away at the reward reserved for the World to Come.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is a familiar to us from another story, that of R. Chanina ben Dosa and his wife, as recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Ta’anit* (25a):

Once his wife said to him: “How long shall we go on suffering so much?”

He replied: “What shall we do?”

“Pray that something may be given to you.”

He prayed, and there emerged the figure of a hand reaching out to him a leg of a golden table. Later she saw in a dream that the pious would one day eat at a three-legged golden table, but he would eat at a two-legged table. Her husband said to her: “Are you content that all the world shall eat at a perfect table and we at an imperfect table?”

She replied: “What then shall we do? Pray that the leg should be taken away from you.” He prayed and it was taken away.

Rabba bar Avuha follows the example of R. Chanina’s wife. One must not take away from the reward vouchsafed for the World to Come,[[22]](#footnote-22) even if this means that one will suffer in this world.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The narratives share a common formulation that is quite intriguing.

“Who would so eat his [portion in] the World [to Come] as Rabba bar Avuha has done?”

“Are you content that all the world shall eat at a perfect table and we at an imperfect table?”

“Eat” and “world” are used in both stories, though with different meanings. Still, this commonality creates a link between the stories, since the message is the same: It is folly to benefit in this world by taking away from one’s reward in the World to Come.

The interweaving of the motif from the story of R. Chanina ben Dosa, whose poverty is described as quite severe, enhances the picture of Rabba bar Avuha as being in extreme financial distress. At the same time, the comparison also sharpens the distinction between the two narratives, as R. Chanina ben Dosa’s decision to return the golden table leg to the World to Come leaves him in a state of destitution. This conclusion sharpens the diametrical opposition between the worlds and the exigency of choosing benefit in this world or benefit in the World to Come. Self-sacrifice and the readiness to live a life of privation in this world allow the maximization of reward in the World to Come.

The narrative of Rabba bar Avuha ends differently: His decision to deny himself the benefit from the storehouses of the World to Come in this world constitutes passing a test, allowing him to ultimately have the best of both worlds. On the one hand, he does not actually reduce the reward awaiting him in Heaven after his death; on the other hand, the scent of the leaves remains on his robe, and selling it allows him to live out the rest of his days with economic security. In any case, the message that arises from our narrative and its comparison to the narrative of R. Chanina ben Dosa is that the very refusal to take something from what is vouchsafed for the World to Come allows one to have a certain benefit from that domain – enough to solve the problem of poverty, even if it does not make the sage rich.

**Summary**

In conclusion, reading the narrative of Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu on its own raises problems of thematic unity.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the narrative, various issues arise, and not all of the parts of the narrative can be integrated in a unified and uniform manner. A central theme in the narrative is how a scholar’s poverty undermines his studies, and this problem is solved in a surprising way. The message in the story is tied to the way in which the dilemma of indigence is solved: It is not taking from the Garden of Even which resolves the quandary of economic insecurity, but rather the decision to refuse to do so[[25]](#footnote-25) — with the aim of preserving one’s portion in the World to Come — which creates a dignified solution to deprivation in this world.

It may be that the setting, which is determined at the opening of the narrative, is connected symbolically to the matter of the scholar’s poverty or the transition to the Garden of Eden, foreshadowing this dramatic turn at the outset of the tale.

In the next *shiur*, we will address the reading of the narrative within the broader context of the *sugya*.

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

1. Rashi 113b, s.v. *she-mesadderin*, offers two explanations of the term “*seder*” in this context: Either it refers to evaluating the debtor so that he can keep the necessities of life, or it is to be read “*sered*,” cognate to *sarid*, a remnant or survivor. In Tractate *Arakhin*, the *mishna* (6:3) explains what exactly one is allowed to keep when the priest collects on a vow that one has made: “Although it was said that pledges must be taken from those who owe valuations, one is allowed food for thirty days, clothing for twelve months, bed and bedding, shoes, and *tefillin* for oneself.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot, s.v. *mahu*; cf. *Sefer Ha-Yashar, Chiddushim*, ch. 602, Schlesinger edition, p. 355) suggests that instead of “Is a means test to be applied in favor of a debtor?” we should read, “From where do we know that a means test is to be applied in favor of a debtor?” This reading flies in the face of all textual evidence of direct sources for this *sugya*. Nevertheless, it seems that Rabbeinu Tam’s suggestion is motivated by two considerations:

   From a halakhic perspective, since Rabbeinu Tam rules in accordance with the view of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who does not require means-testing for debtors, he would find it preferable for Eliyahu not to be situated on the other side of the debate, but rather explicating the basis for that view (which is ultimately rejected).

   From a literary perspective, it makes more sense to view Eliyahu’s response (citing a verse from *Vayikra*) as an answer to the question of where a source can be found rather than whether a practice is required.

   Tosafot note that even though their manuscripts have “Is a means test to be applied in favor of a debtor?,” *Halakhot Gedolot* has “From where do we know that a means test is to be applied in favor of a debtor?” Indeed, that is the text that appears in *Halakhot Gedolot* (ed. Venice, p. 308, Laws of Interest, 98a, as adopted by ed. Machon Yerushalayim, 5752, Laws of Interest, p. 496), but it is not in sequence in terms of the order of the *sugyot*. The Hildesheimer edition (Jerusalem, 5740, p. 423) has no such line; it does not appear in the Milan manuscript on which this edition is based (see ibid. Introduction, p. 11). It is not even cited below in the appropriate place, but the editor does not note this fact, though this is not the forum to explore this at length.

   Another advantage of this approach is that it matches Rabba bar Avuha’s next question, *“*From where do we know that a naked man must not separate [*teruma*]?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The commentators deal with this assumption about Eliyahu’s priestly status. Rashi (s.v. *lav*)simply states: “There is a view that Eliyahu is Pinchas, as the former says ‘*Kano kineiti*,’ and of Pinchas it is said, ‘*Be-kano et kinati.’*” In other words, both Eliyahu and Pinchas are defined by their acts of *kana’ut* (zealousness). The earliest source in *Chazal* that equates the two characters is in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 47, Horowitz Edition, p. 171), as well as in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on the Torah in a number of places – e.g. *Shemot* 6:18, when Pinchas is first mentioned as Aharon’s grandson. Henceforth, this identification is echoed in a number of later midrashic sources; see *Torah Sheleima*, vol. 43, pp. 4-5 and footnotes ad loc.

   Still, as *Rishonim* already note (Tosafot et al.), earlier sources in the literature of *Chazal* present alternatives to this approach. *Bereishit Rabba* (ch. 71, Theodor-Albeck Edition, p. 834) presents a debate between R. Eliezer, who identifies Eliyahu as being from the tribe of Gad, and R. Nehorai, who identifies him as being from the tribe of Binyamin. The *midrash* then cites a tradition that Eliyahu himself came to the study hall to declare: “Our rabbis, why do you argue about me? I myself am from the grandchildren of Rachel!” This means that the narrative in our *sugya* is the earliest Talmudic source identifying Eliyahu as a priest (cf. *Midrash Mishlei*, ch. 9, ed. Wissotzky, p. 68).

   On the other hand, it appears that this tradition about Eliyahu’s Aaronic background, in particular his being identified with Pinchas, though it appears in the literature of *Chazal* only from *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* onward, is in fact an ancient tradition from the Land of Israel dating back to the first or second century of the Common Era, as it appears in the Book of Biblical Antiquities (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum,* also known as Pseudo-Philo because it was in the past attributed mistakenly to Philo of Alexandria). This book is part of the Jewish apocrypha of the Second Temple Era; unlike some of the other works in this category, this book does not have content that is antithetical to the teachings in the literature of *Chazal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See below, fn. 7, for an explanation of this sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Megilla* 15b tells of another encounter between Rabba bar Avuha and Eliyahu. The *gemara* states: “‘Let the king and Haman come to the banquet’ — Our Rabbis taught: What was Esther's reason for inviting Haman?” Various *Tanna’im* and *Amora’im* offer explanations of Esther’s mindset. The *gemara* then notes: “Rabba bar Avuha came across Eliyahu and said to him, ‘Which of these reasons prompted Esther to act as she did?’ He replied: ‘[All] the reasons given by all the *Tanna’im* and all the *Amora’im*.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A similar story appears elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 8b): “R. Chiya saw a certain person standing in a cemetery; he said to him: Aren’t you the son of So-and-So the Priest?” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “I cannot even adequately study the four; can I then study the six?” As Rashi (s.v. *be-arba’a*) explains, the simple understanding is that Rabba bar Avahu is referring to the study of four Orders of the Talmud:

   Namely *Mo’ed, Yeshuot [Nezikin]*,and *Nashim* — which are just as relevant in the modern era as when the Temple stood — and *Kodashim* as well, as it is written, “And in every place, there shall be burnt and presented to My name” (*Malakhi* 1:11). Moreover we say (*Menachot* 110a): “These are the Torah scholars who occupy themselves with the laws of the Service in every place; the verse considers it as if they have brought them in the Temple.”

   This would leave two of the Orders, *Zera’im* and *Taharot*.

   Maharsha (*Aggadot* ad loc.), however, renders Rabba bar Avuha’s defense differently: “I cannot even adequately study the fourth; can I then study the sixth?” According to this approach, Rabba is responding directly: If he cannot explain a question from the fourth Order, *Nezikin*, as to means-testing for debtors, surely he cannot tackle an issue for the sixth Order, *Taharot*, as to the status of non-Jewish cemeteries.

   Tosafot (s.v. *hakhi*) maintain that “I cannot even adequately study” does not refer to the Mishna, as all Six Orders of it would have been common knowledge for Torah scholars. (Tosafot seem to be referring to sources such as *Berakhot* 20a in the Babylonian Talmud: “R. Papa said to Abbayei: How is it that for the former generations miracles were performed and for us miracles are not performed? It cannot be because of their [superiority in] study, because in the years of R. Yehuda, the whole of their studies was confined to *Nezikin*, and we study all six Orders, and when R. Yehuda came to [the final tractate of the Mishna] *Uktzin…* he used to say, ‘I see all the difficulties of Rav and Shemuel here!’We, on the other hand, have thirteen versions of *Uktzin*!”) Tosafot therefore assume that the reference must be to the Tosefta of Orders *Zera’im* and *Taharot*,meaning those Tannaitic corpuses that Rabba bar Avuha could have had access to as a second-century Babylonian *Amora*.

   Still, it is reasonable to assume that the narrative, at least in its current composition, is a product of post-Amoraic editing, which means that it is logical that the four Orders referred to are those that the Babylonian Talmud deals with at length and most of whose tractates have a corresponding Gemara, as opposed to the Orders of *Zera’im* and *Taharot,* which only have one tractate each in the Babylonian Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Iyun Ya’akov* in *Ein Ya’akov*,ad loc., s.v. *afilu,* which cites the principle that sight, sound, and scent are not subject to the laws of misappropriation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The additional place mentioned in the literature of *Chazal* is R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s encounter at the entrance to R. Shimon bar Yochai’s burial cave (*Sanhedrin* 98b). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, the event mentioned previously in the same chapter (107b): “For Rav went up to a cemetery, did what he did,and then said: ‘Ninety-nine [have died] through an evil eye, and one through natural causes.’” Rashi ad loc. explains that Rav would whisper certain charms in order to reveal the cause of death of each decedent.

    Other sources describe sages who mark graves or graveyards for reasons of ritual impurity (e.g. R. Bana’a in *Bava Batra* 58a).

    We do not have sources that forbid entering cemeteries per se, although *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (A, ch. 41, ed. Schechter, p. 132) does list not going to a cemetery as one of the four requirements for becoming a *chaver* (fellow). Still, since a *chaver* is distinguished by a commitment to being overly cautious about matters of ritual impurity, it would appear that this is the motivation for this prerequisite. Moreover, *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* is a work that may be dated as relatively late; compare, for example, the parallel list in Tosefta *Demai* 2:14 (ed. Lieberman, p. 71), in which there is no mention of avoiding cemeteries. Tosefta *Terumot* 1:3 (ed. Lieberman, p. 107) states that one who sleeps in a cemetery is a mental incompetent, but this is a reference to spending the night there, not merely visiting such a location.

    For a thorough discussion of visiting cemeteries in the literature of *Chazal*, see Yechezkel Lichtenstein’s *Mi-Tuma Le-Kedusha,* pp. 218-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, the story of R. Chiya and R. Yonatan, *Berakhot* 18a, which does not explicitly discuss visiting cemeteries, but since the place lies at the center of the story, with its location and the consequences thereof being very prominent, it cannot be ignored. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Concerning the symbolic significance of cemeteries in the literature of *Chazal* and in Jewish culture in general, see Avriel Bar-Levav, *“*Another Place: The Cemetery in Jewish Culture,” Pe'amim 98-99 (2003): 5-38. As Bar-Levav notes (p. 7), the studies done up until this point concerning cemeteries have been historical in nature, focusing on certain graveyards, monuments, and visitations. He takes a different approach, analyzing the cemetery as a general concept in an attempt to characterize its significance in different sources. For this reason, we rely primarily on Bar-Levav’s work below. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bar-Levav, ibid., pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In this context, Bar Levav (ibid., pp. 14-15) cites, for example, the words of the Babylonian Talmud in *Ta’anit* 16a, which we will cite below, as well as the story of the pious man in the cemetery from *Berakhot* 18b, which we have previously discussed. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Although the cemetery in question is a non-Jewish one, it seems that this detail is included because of its ramifications for the laws of ritual impurity, which appear later on in the action. Eliyahu appears in other *aggadot* as well as a bridge between worlds, viz. e.g. *Bava Metzia* 85b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, the story of the pious man in the cemetery, which we discussed thoroughly earlier in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Compare this to the Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 2:1, 65a. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Concerning them, see Albeck, *Mavo La-Talmudim*, pp. 179, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Literarily speaking, we may offer another approach. We know that Rabba bar Avuha is poor at the beginning of this narrative, and it is reasonable to posit that he is also a debtor who has defaulted on his loans, and this means that his question to Eliyahu as to whether there is means-testing for debtors is a personal one — he needs to know if he will be allowed to keep the necessities of his life… [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. *Bava Kama* 11b; a robe being the basic garment of a pauper appears, e.g., in *Ta’anit* 23b. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. It may be that any benefit takes away from one’s merits, since this is a payment of reward. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Still, the stories are not identical. R. Chanina’s wife, in order to save their portion in the World to Come, must surrender the golden leg completely. Rabba bar Avuha, on the other hand, empties his robe but still keeps the benefit of the scent of the leaves that it has absorbed; this allows him to support his sons-in-law.

    It is possible that this distinction is not significant, but simply reflects the facts of each episode. Alternatively, the author of our narrative might have wanted to provide a happy ending, namely the possibility that Rabba bar Avuha could receive something that would improve his economic situation without taking away from his portion in the World to Come. On the other hand, it may be that the narrative as it stands before us expresses a different worldview than that of the story in *Ta’anit*. In any case, we should note the fact that Rabba bar Avuha distributes the money to his sons-in-law, which may indicate his refusal to derive benefit directly even from this boon (cf. Maharsha, *Aggadot* ad loc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In another place in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 140a), this concern is phrased differently: “R. Yosef said: I once entered the baths after Mar Ukva; on leaving I was offered a cup of [such] wine, and I experienced [a cooling sensation] from the hair of my head [right] down to my toe nails; and had I drunk another glass I would have been afraid lest it be deducted from my merits in the future world!” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. We should note that this a common problem in stories about the sages in the literature of *Chazal*; viz. e.g. Yona Fraenkel, *Sippur Ha-Aggada: Achdut shel Tokhen Ve-Tzura*, pp. 32-34, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This seems to be the right thing to do even though it is offered to him in a legitimate way. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)