

Honi the Circle-Drawer: Can One Pray for a Miracle?

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.2.1 21, On Onias (April, 65 BCE)

After Hyrcanus made these promises to Aretas [the King of Arabia]...Aretas made an assault upon the Temple with his entire army and besieged Aristobulus within. The people joined Hyrcanus and assisted him in the siege, while none but the priests continued to support Aristobulus. So Aretas united the forces of the Arabs and the Jews and pressed the siege vigorously. As this happened at the time when the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which we call Passover, was celebrated, the most reputable men among the Jews left the country and fled into Egypt.

Now there was one named Onias, a righteous man and beloved of God, who, in a certain drought, had once prayed to God to put an end to the intense heat, and God had heard his prayer and sent rain.

Now seeing that this civil war would last a great while, he had hidden himself, but they took him to the Jewish camp and desired that just as by his prayers he had once put an end to the drought, so he might in like manner call curses down on Aristobulus and his supporters. And when, having refused and made excuses, he was nonetheless compelled by the mob to supplicate, he said, "O God, king of the whole world! Since those that stand now with me are your people, and those that are besieged are also your priests, I beseech you, that you will neither hear the prayers of those others against these men, nor to bring about what is asked by these men against those others."

Whereupon the wicked Jews that stood about him, as soon as he had made this prayer, stoned him to death. But God punished them immediately for their barbarity, and took vengeance on them for the murder of Onias...He did not delay their punishment, but sent a mighty and vehement storm of wind that destroyed the crops of the entire country, until a modius of wheat at that time cost eleven drachmae.

2. Megilat Taanit

On the twentieth [of Adar] the people fasted for rain and it fell for them. Because there was a famine and drought in the land of Israel, rain did not fall for three consecutive years until Honi Hame'agel went down before the ark and he prayed and rain fell. The day the rain fell they made into a holiday.

3. Mishnah Taanit 3, 8 (MS Kaufman)

On any calamity that befalls the community, we sound the shofar, except for an overabundance of rain. It once happened that they said to Honi Hama'agel: Pray that it should rain. He said to them: Go and bring in the [portable clay] Pesah ovens, so that they do not dissolve. He then prayed but no rain fell. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it and exclaimed: Master of the Universe! Your children have turned to me because they see that I am as a member of Your household. I swear by Your great Name, that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children. Rain began to drip. He said: This is not that I asked for; rather, for rain that will fill the cisterns, ditches and caves. The rain then started to come down with great force. He said: This is not that I asked for; rather, rain of benevolence, blessing, and bounty. Rain then started falling in a normal fashion until the Israelites were forced to go from Jerusalem to the Temple. They said to him: Just as you prayed for it to rain, pray that the rain cease. He said to them: Go see if the stone of the claimers has been covered by water.

Shimon ben Shatach sent to him: Were it not that you are Honi, I would place you under the ban, but what can I do to you, since you make yourself as a favorite child before the Omnipresent, and He fulfills your requests, as a favorite child whose father fulfills his request. Regarding you Scripture states: "May your father and mother be glad and may she who bore you, rejoice" (Proverbs 23:25).

על כל צרה שתבוא על הציבור מתריעים עליה
חוץ מרוב גשמים מעשה שאמרו לחוני המעגל
התפלל שיירדו גשמים אמ' להם צאו והכניסו
תנורי פסחים בשביל שלא ימקו והתפלל ולא
ירדו גשמים:

עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה ואמ' רבונ' שלעולם בניך
שמו פניהם עלי? שאני כבו בית לפניך ושבוע אני
בשמה הגדול שאיני זו מיפן על שתרחם על
בניך:

התחילו הגשמים מנטפים אמ' לא כה שאלתי
אלא גשמי בורות שיחים ומערות ירדו כזעף אמ'
לא כה שאלתי אלא גשמי רצון ברכה ונדבה ירדו
כתיקנו עד שעלו ישרא' מירוש' להר הבית מפני
הגשמים אמ' לו בשם שהתפללתה עליהם שיירדו
כה היתפלל שילכו להם אמ' להם צאו וראו אם
נימסת אבן הטועים:

שלח לו שמעון בן שטח אמ' לו צריך אתה לנדות
אבל מה אעשה לך ואתה מתחטא לפני המקום
כבן שהוא מתחטא לאביו ועושה לו רצונו ועליה
הכתוב אומ' ישמה אביה ואמה ותגל יולדתה:

4. Mishnah Makkot 2, 1

וְאֵלֵּי הֵן הַגּוֹלִין הַהוֹרֵג נֶפֶשׁ בְּשִׁגְגָה הֵיאָה מְעַגֵּל בְּמַעֲגִילָה נִפְלָה עָלָיו וְהָרַגְתּוּ

These are the people who are exiled: Anyone who kills a person unintentionally. If one was rolling a roller to smooth the plaster that he applied to seal his roof and the roller fell upon a person and killed him.

5. Bavli Taanit 25a – Accusatory Prayer

Levi decreed a fast but rain did not come. He said before God: Master of the Universe, You have ascended and sat up high, and You do not have mercy upon Your children. Rain came, but as a punishment for his harsh statement toward God, Levi became lame.

6. Bavli Taanit 24a – Bothersome Prayer

One day Rabbi Yosei from Yokrat hired day laborers to work his field. It grew late and he did not bring them food. The workers said to the son of Rabbi Yosei from Yokrat: We are starving. They were sitting under a fig tree, so the son said: Fig tree, fig tree. Yield your fruits, so that my father's workers may eat. The fig tree yielded fruit, and they ate.



In the meantime, his father came and said to the workers: Do not be angry with me for being late, as I was engaged in a mitzva, and until just now I was traveling. They said to him: May the Merciful One satisfy you just as your son satisfied us. He said to them: From where? They said: Such-and-such an incident occurred. Rabbi Yosei from Yokrat said to his son: My son, you troubled your Creator to cause the fig to yield its fruit not in its proper time, so too, you will be gathered before your time.

7. Bavli Taanit 23b – Receiving Honor

Hanan HaNehba was the son of Honi HaMe'aggel's daughter. When the world was in need of rain, the Sages would send schoolchildren to him, and they would grab him by the hem of his cloak and say to him: Father, Father, give us rain. He said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, act on behalf of these children, who cannot distinguish between their Father in Heaven, Who can provide rain, and the father who cannot provide rain. The Gemara asks: And why was he called Hanan HaNehba? Because he would hide [maḥbi] himself in the lavatory so that people would not bestow honor upon him.

8. Bavli Taanit 24a – Benefit from a Miracle

Whenever the charity collectors would see Elazar of the village of Birta, they would hide from him, as any money Elazar had with him he would give them, and they did not want to take all his property. One day, Elazar went to the market to purchase what he needed for his daughter's dowry. The charity collectors saw him and hid from him.

He went and ran after them, saying to them: I adjure you, tell me, in what mitzva are you engaged? They said to him: We are collecting money for the wedding of an orphan boy and an orphan girl. He said to them: I swear by the Temple service that they take precedence over my daughter. He took everything he had with him and gave it to them. He was left with one single dinar, with which he bought himself wheat, and he then ascended to his house and threw it into the granary.

Elazar's wife came and said to her daughter: What has your father brought? She said to her mother: Whatever he brought he threw into the granary. She went to open the door of the granary, and saw that the granary was

full of wheat, so much so that it was coming out through the doorknob, and the door would not open due to the wheat. Elazar's daughter went to the study hall and said to her father: Come and see what your He Who loves You, the Almighty, has performed for you. He said to her: I swear by the Temple service, this wheat is consecrated property to you, and you have a share in it only as one of the poor Jews.

9. Bavli Shabbat 53b – Natural is Better

The Sages taught: There was an incident where one man's wife died, and she left him a son to nurse, and he did not have money to pay the wages of a wet-nurse. And a miracle was performed on his behalf, and he developed breasts like the two breasts of a woman, and he nursed his son.

Rav Yosef said: Come and see how great this person is that a miracle of that magnitude was performed on his behalf. Abaye said to him: On the contrary, how dishonorable is this person that the order of creation was altered on his behalf.

10. Bavli Taanit 24b – Out of Season

Ifra Hormiz, mother of King Shapur, said to her son: Do not interfere and quarrel with the Jews, as whatever they request from God, their Master, He gives them. He said to her: What is this? She replied: They pray for mercy and rain comes. He said to her: That occurs merely because it is the time for rain. Rather, let them pray for mercy now, in the summer season of Tammuz, and let rain come. Ifra Hormiz sent a message to Rava: Direct your attention and pray for mercy that rain may come. He prayed for mercy, but rain did not come.

He said before God: Master of the Universe, it is written: "O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what work You did in their days, in days of old" (Psalms 44:2), but we have not seen it with our own eyes. As soon as he said this, rain came until the gutters of Mehoza overflowed and poured into the Tigris River. Rava's father came and appeared to him in a dream and said to him: Is there anyone who troubles Heaven so much? He said to him: Change your place of rest at night. He changed his place, and the next day he found that his bed had been slashed by knives.

11. Mishnah Berakhot 9, 3 – Vain Prayer

מְבָרַךְ עַל הַרְעָה מְעִין הַטּוֹבָה, וְעַל הַטּוֹבָה מְעִין הַרְעָה. הַצּוֹעֵק לְשֹׁעֵבֵר, הָרִי זֹה תְּפִלַּת שָׁוְא. פִּיּוּז. הִיְתָה אִשְׁתּוֹ מְעַבְרָת, וְאָמַר, יְהִי רְצוֹן שִׁפְתַּי אֲשֶׁר יִזְכֵּר, הָרִי זֹה תְּפִלַּת שָׁוְא. הִיְתָה בָּא בְּדַרְךְ וְשָׁמַע קוֹל צְוֹנָה בְּעִיר, וְאָמַר יְהִי רְצוֹן שִׁלָּא יְהִי אֵלֹה בְּנֵי בֵּיתִי, הָרִי זֹה תְּפִלַּת שָׁוְא

12. Bavli Taanit 3a-b – Ineffective Prayer

תָּנָא: בְּטַל וּבְרוּחוֹת, לֹא חִיְבּוּ חֻכְמִים לְהַזְכִּיר. וְאִם בָּא לְהַזְכִּיר — מְזַכֵּיר. מֵאֵי טַעְמָא? אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: לְפִי שָׂאִין נְעַצְרִין... אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: הַלְכָּהּ, בִּימֹת הַסַּמָּה: אָמַר "מְשִׁיב הַרוּחַ" — אֵין מְחֻזְרִין אוֹתוֹ. אָמַר "מֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם" — מְחֻזְרִין אוֹתוֹ. בִּימֹת הַגֶּשֶׁמִּים: לֹא אָמַר "מְשִׁיב הַרוּחַ" — אֵין מְחֻזְרִין אוֹתוֹ. לֹא אָמַר "מֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם" — מְחֻזְרִין אוֹתוֹ. וְלֹא עוֹד, אֶלָּא אֶפְּלִי אָמַר "מְעַבֵּיר הַרוּחַ וּמְפָרִים הַטַּל" — אֵין מְחֻזְרִין אוֹתוֹ.

13. Bavli Taanit 23b – Be Careful What You Wish For

Rabbi Mani was frequently found before Rabbi Yitzhak ben Elyashiv. Once, Rabbi Mani said to him: The wealthy members of my father-in-law's house are persecuting me. Rabbi Yitzhak said: May they become poor. And they became poor. Some time later, Rabbi Mani said to his teacher: They are pressuring me for financial support. Rabbi Yitzhak said: May they become rich again. And they became rich.

Rabbi Mani said to his teacher: The members of my household, i.e., my wife, are not acceptable to me. Rabbi Yitzhak said: What is her name? Rabbi Mana replied: Hana. Rabbi Yitzhak declared: Let Hana grow beautiful, and indeed she grew beautiful. After a while, Rabbi Mani said to Rabbi Yitzhak: She acts haughtily toward me. He said to him: If so, let Hana return to her homely appearance, and she returned to her homely appearance.

14. Bavli Taanit 24a

רַבִּי יְהוּדָה נְשִׂיאָה גְּזוֹר תַּעֲנִיתָא, בְּעֵא רַחֲמֵי וְלֹא אָתָּא מִיִּטְרָא. אָמַר: כַּמָּה אֵיכָּא מְשֻׁמּוּאֵל הָרַמְתִּי לִיהוּדָה בְּן גַּמְלִיאֵל! אוֹי לֹו לְדוֹר שְׁכֵן נְתַמְקַע, אוֹי לֹו לְמִי שְׁעֵלְתָהּ בְּנִמְיוֹ כָּף! חֲלַשׁ דַּעֲתִיהָ וְאָתָּא מִיִּטְרָא.

Rabbi Yehuda Nesia decreed a fast and prayed for mercy, but rain did not come. He said, lamenting: How great is the difference between the prophet Samuel of Rama and myself, Yehuda ben Gamliel. Woe to the generation that is stuck with this leadership; woe to him in whose days this has occurred. He grew depressed, and rain came.

15. Bavli Taanit 25b

The Sages taught: An incident occurred involving Rabbi Eliezer, who decreed a complete cycle of thirteen fasts upon the congregation, but rain did not fall. At the end of the last fast, the congregation began to exit the synagogue. He said to them: Have you prepared graves for yourselves? All the people burst into tears, and rain fell.

16. Bavli Taanit 12b

How do they act on a fast day? Abaye said: From the morning until the middle of the day they examine the affairs of the town by checking if there are any deficiencies or corruptions in the city, moral or otherwise, and attempt to fix them, as these problems may have been the cause of the Divine punishment. From this point forward, for a quarter of the day they read a portion from the Torah and a portion from the Prophets [haftara]. From this point forward, they pray and petition for mercy.

17. Bavli Taanit 23a – The End of Honie

R. Johanan said: This righteous man [Honi] was throughout the whole of his life troubled about the meaning of the verse, A Song of Ascents, When Hashem brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like unto them that dream. Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years?

One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children. Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years.

When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree? The man replied: I am his grandson. Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years. He then caught sight of his donkey who had given birth to several generations of mules; and he returned home. He there enquired, Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive? The people answered him, His son is no more, but his grandson is still living. Thereupon he said to them: I am Honi the Circle-Drawer, but no one would believe him. He then repaired to the Beth Hamidrash and there he overheard the scholars say, The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer, for whenever he came to the Beth Hamidrash he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, I am he; but the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed [for death] and he died. Raba said: Hence the saying, Either companionship or death.