

The Baal Shem Tov and the Boy who Played Flute on Yom Kippur

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Editors

A Talmudic reading of a Hassidic tale—and vice versa. ¹

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The Boy and the Flute

One of the most memorable Hassidic stories that has come down to us tells the tale of a simple-minded boy who joined his father for Yom Kippur prayers at the Study Hall of the founder of Hassidism, the Baal Shem Tov. Here is the version recorded in S. Y. Agnon's classic High Holiday anthology:²

החליל The Flute

כפרי אחד היה רגיל להתפלל בימים נוראים בבית מדרשו של הבעש"ט ז"ל. היה לו ילד אטום לב, שלא היה יכול לתפוס אפילו את צורת האותיות, כל שכן לומר שום דבר שבקדושה. לא היה אביו מביאו לעיר, מחמת שלא ידע כלום.

A certain villager used to pray on the Days of Awe in the House of Study of the Baal Shem Tov. He had a child whose wits were dull and who could not even read the letters in the prayer book, much less recite a holy word. His father never brought him along to the city, because the boy was completely ignorant.

כיון שנעשה בר מצוה, נטלו אביו עמו על יום הכפורים, כדי לשמרו שלא יאכל ביום צום קדוש מחמת חסרון ידיעה.

But when the boy became Bar Mitzvah, his father took him with him to the city for Yom Kippur, so as to be able to watch him and keep him from eating from simple ignorance.

היה לו לילד חליל קטן, שהיה מחלל בו תמיד בשעה שהיה יושב בשדה ורועה את הצאן. נטל את החליל ונתנו בבגדו, ואביו לא ידע.

Now the boy had a little flute on which he used to play all the time when he sat in the field tending his flock. He took the flute with him from home and put it in his coat, and his father did not know about it.



<p>היה הילד יושב כל יום הכפורים בבית המדרש, ולא התפלל, מפני שלא ידע כלום.</p> <p>בשעת תפילת מוסף אמר לאביו: אבא, רוצה אני לחלל בחלילי". נתחלחל אביו וגער בו. נתאפק הילד על כרחו.</p> <p>בשעת תפילת מנחה חזר ואמר: "יהי מה, הרשני נא לחלל".</p>	<p>The boy sat in The House of Prayer all Yom Kippur without praying, because he did not know how.</p> <p>During the Additional Prayer he said to his father. "Father, I want to play the flute." His father became terrified and spoke sharply to the boy. The boy had to restrain himself.</p> <p>During the Afternoon Prayer the boy repeated again: "Father let me play on my flute."</p>
<p>כיון שראה אביו של התינוק שהוא מבקש מאד לחלל, אמר לו: "היכן החלילי?". הראה לו על כיס בגדו. נטל אביו של התינוק את כיס בגדו והחזיק בידו את הכיס עם החליל, כדי שלא יוציאו ויחלל בו.</p> <p>עמד והתפלל תפילת נעילה, כשידו מחזקת בכיס ובחליל. באמצע התפילה שמת הנער בחזקה את החליל מתוך הכיס ומיד אביו ונתן קול גדול בחליל, עד שתמהו כל השומעים.</p>	<p>Seeing that the boy wanted badly to play on his flute, his father said to him "Where is the flute? The child pointed to the pocket of his coat. The father therefore held the child's pocket in his hand, to keep the boy from taking out the flute and playing on it.</p> <p>Holding the pocket with the flute in this way, the man stood and prayed the Closing Prayer. In the middle of the prayer, the boy forced the flute out of his pocket and blew a blast so loud that all who heard it were taken aback.</p>
<p>כיון ששמע הבעש"ט את הקול, קיצר מכפי הרגלו.</p> <p>אחר התפילה אמר: תינוק זה בקול חלילו העלה כל התפילות והקל מעלי, שתינוק זה אינו יודע כלום, ומאחר שכל היום הקדוש ראה ושמע תפילת ישראל, נתלקח בו ניצוץ קדשו כמו אש ממש, ואש תשוקתו בערה בו בכל פעם יותר ויותר, עד כלות נפשו ממש, ובחוזק תשוקתו חילל באמיתות נקודת לבו בלא שום פניה, רק לשמו יתברך לבדו, והבל פיו הנקי נתקבל מאד לפניו יתברך, ועל ידי זה העלה כל התפילות.</p>	<p>When the Baal Shem Tov heard the sound, he shortened his prayer.</p> <p>After the prayer the Baal Shem Tov said: "With the sound of this flute the child lifted up all the prayers and eased my burden. For this child does not know anything but by dint of his seeing and hearing the prayer of Israel all of this holy day, the prayer's holy spark kindled a fire in him and the flames of his longing burned higher and higher until his soul nearly expired. Because of the strength of his longing he played the note of his heart truly, without any distraction, for the sole sake of the Name of God. Now the pure breath of his lips was very acceptable to Him and by this means all the prayers were lifted up.</p>

The motif of praiseworthy, naïve prayer is a central theme in the story, and is a popular motif in folk tales through

the ages.³ This story is different, however, since flute playing on the Sabbath or on a holiday is not simply naïve, but prohibited in Jewish law.⁴ Thus, there is some tension between the boy's praiseworthy flute-playing, and the problematic nature of this act in Jewish ritual.

Did the Boy Play a Flute?

Some other versions that try to neutralize the story's subversiveness. One tradition has the child whistling or shouting, instead of praying properly.⁵ In a more moderate version, the child uses the only Jewish knowledge he possesses, so that instead of reading the prayers he recites the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In my opinion, the version presented above, where the child plays the flute, is original while other traditions were created in order to avoid the halakhic problem of the Baal Shem Tov praising a transgressive act.

The version where the boy plays the flute is preferable because it parallels the ritual shofar blowing during the High Holidays. As is well known, the shofar is blown not only on Rosh Hashanah, but, since the Geonic period, also at the conclusion of the prayer on Yom Kippur.⁶ This is precisely when the boy successfully wrests the instrument from his father's grip and blows, with all his heart and soul, a powerful, wordless prayer to God: "... the boy forced the flute out of his pocket and blew a blast so loud that all who heard it were taken aback."⁷

Furthermore, this version also makes for a particularly insightful comparison with a talmudic passage about the halachic issues surrounding flute-playing on the holiday.

The Flute:

The Chapter in m. Sukkah

The fifth chapter of tractate Sukkah is called "the flute," after the Mishnah's opening words: "The flute [was played sometimes on] five days, and [sometimes on] six (החליל חמשה וששה)." This ruling is then glossed as follows:

משנה סוכה ה:א m. Sukkah 5:1

זהו החליל של בית השואבה, שאינו דוחה לא את השבת ולא את יום טוב.	This was the flute of the place of water drawing, which overrides neither Shabbat nor holidays.
אמרו: כל מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה לא ראה שמחה מימיו.	They [the Sages] said: Anyone who has never seen the rejoicing at the place of water drawing has never seen rejoicing in all his days.

The Mishnah emphasizes that despite the special character of the rejoicing over the annual water libation ritual in the Temple,⁸ the prohibition against flute playing on the Sabbath remained in effect.

According to the Yerushalmi, this line implies that another Temple flute-playing, performed at the altar, does in fact override Shabbat and holidays: "הא שלקרבן דוחה –yet [the flute] of the sacrifice overrides" (p. Sukkah 5:1; 55a).

Indeed, according to m. *Arakhin*, the flute was used in Temple ritual alongside a variety of sacrifices, and was even played on festivals, including Sukkot:

משנה, ערכין (פ"ב מ"ג) Mishnah, Arakhin (2:3)

ובשנים-עשר יום בשנה החליל מכה לפני המזבח:	On twelve days in the year the flute was played before the altar:
בשחיתת הפסח הראשון,	At the slaughtering of the <i>Pesach</i> offering for the first <i>Pesach</i> ,
בשחיתת הפסח השני,	at the slaughtering of the <i>Pesach</i> offering for the second <i>Pesach</i> ,
וביום טוב הראשון שלפסח,	on the first festival day of <i>Pesach</i> ,

וביום העצרת, on the festival day of Shavuot,

ובשמונת ימי החג. and on the eight days of Sukkot.

The Mishnah is clear. The flute was in fact played on the festival,⁹ as part of the regular sacrificial rite.

A Flute Playing at the Libation Ceremony vs. Alongside Sacrifices

Why does the flute of sacrifice override Shabbat while the flute of the water libation ceremony does not? The Talmud records the following discussion:

b. Sukkah 50b – 51a:
בבלי, סוכה נ ע"ב – נא
ע"א

תנו רבנן: החליל דוחה את השבת, דברי רבי יוסי בר יהודה,	The Sages taught: The flute overrides Shabbat – the statement of Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda.
וחכמים אומרים: אף יום טוב אינו דוחה.	And the Rabbis say: It does not override even a Festival.

[1] אמר רב יוסף: מחלוקת בשיר של קרבן,
[1] Rav Yosef said: The dispute is with regard to the song that the Levites sang accompanying the daily offering.

דברי יוסי סבר: עיקר שירה בכלי, ועבודה היא, ודוחה את השבת.
As Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda holds that the primary essence of song is the accompaniment by musical instruments, and consequently these instruments are a component of the Temple service and override Shabbat.

ורבנן סברי: עיקר שירה בפה, ולא עבודה היא, ואינה דוחה את השבת.
The Rabbis hold that the primary essence of song is singing with the mouth, and consequently the instruments are not a component of the service; they merely accompany the singing on occasion and therefore they do not override Shabbat.

אבל שיר של שואבה – דברי הכל שמחה היא, ואינה דוחה את השבת...
However, with regard to the song of the Drawing of the Water, everyone agrees that it is rejoicing and not a component of the Temple service; therefore it does not override Shabbat.

[2] ורבי ירמיה בר אבא אמר: מחלוקת בשיר של שואבה,
[2] And Rabbi Yirmiya bar Abba said: The dispute between Rabbi Yosei bar Yehuda and the Rabbis is with regard to the song of the Drawing of the Water.

Rabbi Yosei bar Yehuda holds that extra rejoicing also overrides Shabbat,

דברי יוסי בר יהודה סבר: שמחה יתירה נמי דוחה את השבת,
And the Rabbis hold that extra rejoicing does not override Shabbat.

ורבנן סברי: שמחה יתירה אינה דוחה את השבת.
However, with regard to the song that the Levites sang (and played music) to accompany the offering, everyone agrees that the music is part of the sacred service, and that it overrides the Shabbat.

אבל בשיר של קרבן – דברי הכל עבודה היא, ודוחה את השבת.

In explaining the reasoning of an earlier sage, Rav Yosef says that the flute of the sacrifice is played even on Shabbat because it is part of the sacrificial service and by special rule, such service overrides regular Shabbat prohibitions.¹⁰ However, we do not play the flute at the Temple water libation festival because acts of joy – even in the Temple – do not override the Shabbat. This is also reflected in R. Yirmiyah bar Abba's explanation of the

Sages.

What was the Child Expressing with his Flute?

Reading the story of the child who played the flute on Yom Kippur in light of this talmudic debate helps explain not only some of its features but also Baal Shem Tov's response. First, the story opens by setting the events in the Beit Midrash, or Study Hall, of the Baal Shem Tov. This reflects the Hassidic idea that the Beit Midrash of the Baal Shem Tov was equivalent to the Jerusalem Temple.

The boy's father tries mightily to keep his son from playing the flute, because in his eyes the son wants to play his flute merely as an expression of joy, which even in the Temple was a violation of the festival's sanctity.

In the Baal Shem Tov's eyes, however, the boy hoped that his flute playing would be accepted as a true form of worship. And as we learned in the talmudic discussion, it is permitted to play the flute of the sacrifice, even on Shabbat, since it was deemed an integral part of the service.

Reading the Story and the Talmud in Light of Each Other

In our reading, this classic Hassidic tale about the boy who played the flute on Yom Kippur is informed by the talmudic sugya about whether flute playing overrides the Sabbath. By the same token, the Hassidic story may illuminate the talmudic sugya.

Specifically, the reason the flute of service overrides the Sabbath and not the flute of joy is *not* the obligatory nature of the sacred service per se. Rather, the primary point is that human beings have a basic need to communicate with God. This may be accomplished through various modes, including a musical instrument or a child's inchoate cry. From the perspective of the Hassidic tale, this elementary spiritual need should neither be ignored nor hindered, even on the Sabbath. Every prayer is considered to be sacred service.



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1. A more complete Hebrew version of this article can be found in M. Katz, "The Tale of 'The Flute' and the Talmudic Chapter: 'The Flute,'" *Pathways through Aggadah*, 7–8 (2004–2005): pp. 45–56 (Hebrew) [↩](#)
2. See S. Y. Agnon, *Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1937). The translation is adapted from Maurice T. Galpert, *Days of Awe* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1995). For the source of the tale, see *Sefer Kehal Hasidim he-hadash* (Lemberg, 1905). As Agnon notes in the introduction to the anthology, he occasionally had access to numerous versions of a text, from which he chose one version and "beautified" its language. [↩](#)
3. There is a motif attested in Russian and Lithuanian folk literature about a man who does not know how to pray yet is so holy that he can walk on water. See [Thompson Motif Index V51.1](#). [↩](#)
4. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Shabbat* 23:4 and *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim* 337.3. [↩](#)
5. "...When he saw the great commotion in the synagogue, his heart was in his midst, and he cried out in a loud voice: 'Kukerikoo, God, have mercy!'" See Y.Y. Schneerson *Torat ha-Hassidut*, (part 47) 1945, pp. 5-

- 6 (also Y. Elstein, *ibid*, p.12, n. 16.) In addition, see S.Y. Zevin, *Sippurei Chassidim LeMoadei HaShana* (Tel Aviv, 1985), p. 95; and Sholem Asch, "A Dorf Tsaddik" in *Sholem Asch Collected Writings* (Odessa, 1912). ↩
6. The first mention of shofar blowing on Yom Kippur appears in the Geonic prayerbook, *Seder Rav Amram*. On the custom and its evolution, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 2003), vol. 7, pp.298-324. ↩
7. Not incidentally, following the telling of the "The Flute" in his High Holiday anthology, Agnon cites the source for blowing the Shofar at the end of the Ne'ilah prayer. ↩
8. On the water libation, See Zev Farber, "[Water Libation: A Sukkot Rain Making Ritual](#) ." ↩
9. The Tosefta even records an opinion that it may override the legally more stringent Sabbath: "A flute does not override the Sabbath; Rabbi Yose bar Yuda says it does" – חליל אין דוחה את השבת; ר' יוסי בר' יהודה אומר: – (t Arakhin 1:13). See also t. Sukkah 4:14. ↩
10. For a tannaitic source, see t. Shabbat 15:16 (ed. Lieberman, p. 74): "The service overrides the Shabbat." ↩