



## Rabbis Versus Harmful Mice: Two Talmudic Stories on Rabbi Pinhas Ben Yair Capability of Controlling Mice

Rabinos versus camundongos prejudiciais: duas histórias talmúdicas sobre a capacidade de controlar camundongos do rabino Pinhas ben Yair

**Abraham Ofir Shemesh<sup>1</sup>**

Ariel University | Ariel, Israel  
avi0603@013.net.il

**Abstract:** This study discusses two stories in Jerusalem Talmud on R. Pinhas ben Yair who controls mice and forces them to gather in one place and to do his wishes. The two stories have in common their demonstration of the learned sage's power to utilize miracles to deal with a harmful animal, thereby saving the people. The "decree" issued by R. Pinhas ben Yair is permissible kind of *hover haver* as it operates within the framework of Jewish rules and does not contain forbidden supernatural elements customary in the pagan world.

**Keywords:** Mice. Pest. Talmudic Stories.

**Resumo:** Este estudo discute duas histórias do *Talmud de Jerusalém* sobre R. Pinhas ben Yair, que controla ratos e os força a se reunir em um só lugar e fazer seus desejos. As duas histórias têm em comum a demonstração do poder do sábio erudito de utilizar milagres para lidar com um animal prejudicial, salvando assim as pessoas. O "decreto" emitido por R. Pinhas ben Yair é uma espécie de *hover haver* permissível, visto que opera dentro da estrutura das regras judaicas e não contém elementos sobrenaturais proibidos costumeiros no mundo pagão.

**Palavras-chave:** Rato. Peste. Talmude.

### Introduction

The house mouse (*Mus musculus*), a small mammal of the order Rodentia, is very ancient in Mediterranean area.<sup>2</sup> In modern Hebrew the term *akhbar* (pl. *akhbarim*) refers to the house mouse. However, in the ancient Jewish literature the term *akhbarim* ("mice") is a collective noun for various types of rodents, such as Günther's vole (*Microtus guentheri*) or rats (*Rattus* sp.).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Professor and the Chairman of the Israel Heritage Department. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ariel University, Israel.

<sup>2</sup> The origin of the house mouse is South-East Asia and it diffused Eurasia during the Holocene. On the origin of the house mouse: CUCCHI, VIGNE AND AUFFRAY, 2005, p. 429–445.

<sup>3</sup> FELIX, 1992, p. 127-133.



Rats and house mice are synanthropic species that live in proximity to humans, and benefits from the association with them. They are existent around or in houses, fields, storeroom and barns and cause damages to crops and food. Rats and mice also carry viruses and bacteria that cause diseases, such as plague.<sup>4</sup>

Mice are described in Talmudic literature as evil creatures that cause much harm, for instance by chewing agricultural crops and even clothing, which is not a normal food.<sup>5</sup> The ancients tried to control, to drive out, or to kill rodents by conventional techniques, such as pesticides and setting the pests' natural enemies against them (for example, cats), as well as supernatural means (incantations and oaths).<sup>6</sup>

### **1 Purpose of the article**

The article analyzes two Talmudic stories on R. Pinhas ben Yair who control mice and compel them to do as he wishes. The article examines the narrative on the background of charming methods in the ancient world and discusses the educational and moral goals of the narrator.

### **2 R. Pinhas ben Yair and the mice in the Jerusalem talmud stories**

The Jerusalem Talmud brings two successive traditions that ascribe to R. Pinhas ben Yair, a Tanna in the fifth generation and the son-in-law of R. Simeon bar Yoḥai (the second century), an unusual ability to control and overcome mice by issuing a "decree" (*gzerah*).<sup>7</sup> In rabbinical sources Pinhas ben Yair is considered a Talmudic sage of unusual behavior and a man of wonders.<sup>8</sup> Portraying his ability to control mice is undoubtedly intended to accentuate this miraculous aspect of his personality.

Interestingly, folk tales have similar stories of miraculous, sometimes strange people, capable of utilizing special necromantic powers to attract rodents that inhabit the city and of saving the plagued residents. One example of this is the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin in west Germany (Der Rattenfänger von Hameln), versions of which exist since medieval times, which describes a reality of witchcraft and control of rodents and people by means of music. In that story, the Hamelin was assaulted in 1284 by a grave mice epidemic and the heads of the city hired a sorcerer who managed to attract the mice by playing his flute and to drown them in Weser river.

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<sup>4</sup> On the plague in the Ancient Times see: 1 SAMUEL 6:4; HERODOTUS, 1920, II, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> On the damages of the rodents in ancient times see: ARISTOTLE, 1965, VI, p. 30; BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Moed Katan, 6b. On the bad nature of the mice see: JERUSALEM TALMUD, Baba Metzia, 3:4, 9b and BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Horayot 13a: "R. Eleazar was asked by his disciples: Why do all persecute the mice? — Because of their bad nature. What is it? Raba replied: They gnaw even at clothes".

<sup>6</sup> BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Baba Metzia, 97a and at length SCHWARTZ, 2001, p. 211-234.

<sup>7</sup> JERUSALEM TALMUD, Demai, 1:3, 22a.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Hullin 7a; DEUTERONOMY RABBAH, 3:3, p. 210; JERUSALEM TALMUD, Demai, 1:3, 22a.



However, when the townspeople refused to pay the piper's wages, he drew to him all the town's children with his flute, and these followed him out of the city, never to be seen again.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.1 R. Pinhas ben Yair reveals the townspeople why the mice are devouring their crops

The first story about R. Pinhas ben Yair tells of a plague of mice that inflicted severe harm on the grain fields of a town whose name is not mentioned. Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair came to a certain place. They [the residents of the place] came and said to him, "Mice are eating all our grain." He forced [the mice to gather] and they came together and began to squeak:

He said to them: "Do you know what they are saying?"

They said to him: "No".

He said to them: "They are saying that the grain has not been tithed."

They said to him: Pledge yourself to us [that if we tithe the grain, the mice won't eat it at all].

He pledged to them, and they were no longer injured by the mice.<sup>10</sup>

R. Pinhas, known for his power to control mice, arrives at some place and the townspeople, who know of his abilities, complain to him that the mice are devouring their crops. He reveals to them the hidden reason for this – improper religious conduct with regard to giving tithes and offerings. Believing that sins are punished, the townspeople understand that the harm to the crops is not a natural phenomenon, so they turn to a religious authority to clarify the spiritual cause of the events.

Dealing with agricultural problems through spiritual-religious reform (prayers, fasts) is a concept reflected in other Jewish sources as well, for instance with regard to the diseases of blight (*shidafon*) and chlorosis (*yerakon*) that afflicted the crops.<sup>11</sup> The punishment of being afflicted by mice in return for not tithing is a form of "quid pro quo". The townspeople took for themselves the grain that was supposed to have been given to the priests or to the poor and paid for this by having their crops reduced such that, ultimately, they did not profit from their conduct. Interestingly, in rabbinical literature Pinhas ben Yair is described as the sage who is most strict in observing the commandment of tithes and even his donkey, an unintelligent creature, is careful to avoid grain that has not been tithed.<sup>12</sup> Hence, as one who is strict about giving tithes, he is worthy and entitled to criticize the townspeople for not strictly maintaining this religious precept.

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<sup>9</sup> On this story and its versions see MIEDER, 1987, p. 45-83; ADAMSON, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> JERUSALEM TALMUD, Demai, 1:3, 22a. The translation is according to Jacob NEUSNER, 2010, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> ALBECK, 1952, Misnah Ta'anit 3:5; BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Ta'anit 19a.

<sup>12</sup> BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Hullin 7a-b; JERUSALEM TALMUD, Demai, 1:3, 22a.



In the story before us the mice are not explicitly portrayed as “wicked”, rather as God’s messengers for the purpose of causing the townspeople to correct their deeds. In this regard, the story joins other sources that perceive inferior creatures, such as bugs and insects, as God’s messengers for afflicting people who deserve to be punished, thwarting their devious plans or, as in our case, causing them to correct their ways.<sup>13</sup>

According to this tradition, R. Pinḥas ben Yair displayed his spiritual might not by killing the mice but rather by attempting to detect the root of the problem. He uncovered the reason for the damage after communicating with the mice and asking them for the meaning of their harm to the crops. In contrast to the townspeople who do not understand the meaning of the squeaks produced by the mice, R. Pinḥas not only understands their language and communicates with them rather is also capable of issuing a “decree” against them, i.e., compelling them to gather before him and explain the reason for their behavior. Knowing the language of the animals is a skill ascribed in Jewish sources to various biblical figures and sages, for instance King Solomon, the Talmudic sage Ilish, and according to our story also R. Pinḥas.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the story is clearly to praise R. Pinḥas and to portray him as a man of wonders who controls the natural world through metaphysical powers.

## 2.2 The second story – R. Pinḥas ben Yair helps the King of *sarkiya* to find the gem swallowed by one of the mice

While the first story depicts the gathering of the mice in one place as a legitimate act, another story relates to the problematic aspects of this action, although the redactor ultimately conveys the message that R. Pinḥas’ act is not to be considered *ḥabar* and it is permissible to gather the mice as R. Pinḥas did:

A pearl belonging to the Saracen (in the text: *sarkiya*) king fell and a mouse swallowed it. He came to "Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair. He said to him: "what am I, *ḥabar* [a spell-binder]?" He said to him: "I came to you because of your good name". He Forced [the mice] and they came together. He saw one of them walking like hunchback. He said: "That one has it". He forced it and it spit up the pearl".<sup>15</sup>

While the first story indicates Pinḥas ben Yair’s reputation in the Jewish world as one who can control mice, the second story indicates that he was well-known even among non-Jews. R. Pinḥas ben Yair gathered the mice in order to help the King of

<sup>13</sup> SHEMESH, 2005, p. 47–73.

<sup>14</sup> See: BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Gittin 45a and at length SHEMESH, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> NEUSNER, 2010, p. 116.



*sarkiya* find the gem swallowed by one of them.<sup>16</sup> Gems are not edible, and this story appears to join other stories and statements that portray the negative image of mice as thieves or evil creatures who eat that which is inedible.

At first R. Pinhas refused to help the king, saying that gathering mice is the work of a charmer and is not something in which he engages. After the king claimed that he had approached him due to his “good reputation” he agreed to the request. He gathered all the mice, identified the perpetrator, and forced it (also by a decree) to divulge the gem. The question is: Why did he have reservations at first and then give in and agree to cooperate? Moreover, why did he immediately agree to help when the people of the Jewish town approached him but not in the case of the king?

The Jewish townspeople knew that R. Pinhas is not a charmer who employs necromantic means, so R. Pinhas immediately agreed to help them. Furthermore, ultimately, he also helped them correct their bad deeds, such that the decree issued against the mice had a purpose. The question or amazed reply: “Do you think that I am a *ḥabar*?!”, aimed at the king, meant: Does the king think that I operate like other sorcerers and therefore appealed to me? When the king answered that he sought his help “due to his good reputation”, R. Pinhas understood that the king does not perceive him as a sorcerer, rather as a Jewish sage with alternative (“permissible”) methods of treating problems involving mice.



Figure 1: Mouse eating nut (below, right) – Source: The Heraklitos Mosaic, Asarotos Oikos (The Unswept Floor), Roman Period (2nd century AD), The Vatican Museum.

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<sup>16</sup> Jastrow identify the term *sarkiya* as Saracens and states that the meaning is Arabic or Ishmaelites. According to Greek and Latin writings in the first three centuries AD, this term refers to an Arab tribe living in the Sinai Peninsula. See: JASTROW, 1903, p. 1030). In the following centuries the term was extended by the Christians and it covered Arab tribes in general. See: RETSÖ, 2003, p. 505-506.



### 2.3 Is the "decree" issued by R. Pinḥas ben Yair is kind of *ḥover ḥaver*?

In both stories R. Pinḥas ben Yair used the same practice – he issued a decree or ordered the mice to do his will and they complied. The element of the righteous person's miraculous power to issue decrees or to cancel them ("The righteous gives orders and God executes") appears in various places in Talmudic literature.<sup>17</sup> The story of Ḥoni the Circle Maker is a representative example that demonstrates the righteous man's power to intervene in the natural system and generate rain in a year of drought (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a).

As early as the period of the Tannaim, the most common interpretive approach among the sages was that the Biblical prohibition of *ḥover ḥaver* (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) is an act of sorcery aimed at controlling animals, such as gathering or killing them by incantations.<sup>18</sup> The "decree" issued by R. Pinḥas ben Yair, forcing the mice to gather, is therefore permissible kind of *ḥover ḥaver* as it operates within the framework of Jewish rules and does not contain forbidden supernatural elements customary in the non-Jewish-pagan world.

Notably, in the era of the Mishna and Talmud the sages did not avoid engaging in sorcery, as Urbach justifiably notes: "There are many testimonies on the spread of sorcery not only among women and common people rather also among the sages in Eretz Israel, and even more so in Babylonia".<sup>19</sup> The approach of Urbach and other researchers was that engaging in the occult was less common in Eretz Israel than in Babylonia.<sup>20</sup> Saul Lieberman, however, disagreed and showed that in the culture of Eretz Israel as well magical practices occupied a prominent place and that the Jews of Eretz Israel did not differ in this respect from other parts of the ancient world.<sup>21</sup>

Fundamentally, the practice utilized by Pinḥas ben Yair is not very different than the conduct of a charmer or sorcerer who uses incantations (words). The difference is that the force utilized to achieve the goal, i.e., personal righteousness or an appeal to God, is considered a legitimate means that is within the permitted boundaries of the Jewish world. In fact, various biblical stories, such as the story of the incense and of the brazen serpent, are not unlike idolatrous or necromantic ceremonies and they aroused grave doubts in rabbinical sources with regard to the boundaries between forbidden occult practices and legitimate religious laws.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Moed Katan 17b; Sotah 12a; Ketubot 103b.

<sup>18</sup> TOSEFTA, Makot 5:6, ZUCKERMANDEL edition, p. 444).

<sup>19</sup> URBACH, 1969, p. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> For example, RAPOPORT, 1852, p. 227; FRANKEL, 1967, p. 49a.

<sup>21</sup> LIEBERMAN, 1963, p. 82-83. See also GAFNI, 1990, p. 164-165.

<sup>22</sup> PESIKTA RABBATI, Meir Ish-Shalom edition, p. 65a, and at length HARARI, 2010, p. 257.



### 3 Discussion and conclusion

The Jerusalem Talmud brings traditions that describe the use of a “decree” or order (executive statement) that forces harmful mice to gather in one place. Use of this method is ascribed to the Tanna R. Pinḥas ben Yair and it is portrayed as a permissible Jewish method, i.e., a practice devoid of forbidden occult elements utilized in the non-Jewish-pagan world.

On principle, in essence decrees are not unlike the acts of the charmer (*ḥabar*) and sorcerer who use oral-verbal incantations. The difference is that the force that helps realize the goal, namely the personal righteousness of the sage or the appeal to God, was perceived as legitimate and within the permissible boundaries of the Jewish world. In the biblical story of the plague of frogs, Moses was described as forcing the frogs to remain in their natural place, i.e., within the boundaries of the Nile, rather than breaching the Egyptian residential boundaries (Ex 8:7). Moses acted as God’s representative and therefore, although he might have been construed as a *ḥabar* in all regards, his act was considered completely legitimate.

To the best of our knowledge, aside from R. Pinḥas ben Yair the power to cause animals to gather was ascribed to no other Talmudic sage. The Talmudic literature contains the story of R. Ḥanina ben Dosa, a Tanna in the first generation who lived at the end of the Second Temple era,<sup>23</sup> who overcame in a special way a poisonous snake (*arvad*) that was inflicting harm on the people of a certain town:

In a certain place there was once a snake (*arvad*) which used to injure people. They came and told R. Ḥanina b. Dosa. He said to them: Show me its hole. They showed him its hole, and he put his heel over the hole, and the snake came out and bit him, and it died. He put it on his shoulder and brought it to the Beth ha-Midrash and said to them: See, my sons, it is not the lizard that kills, it is sin that kills! On that occasion they said: Woe to the man whom a snake meets, but woe to the snake which R. Ḥanina b. Dosa meets!<sup>24</sup>

The two stories have in common their demonstration of the learned sage’s power to utilize miracles to deal with a harmful animal, thereby saving the people. However, the two sages are distinct in the nature of their activity. Pinḥas ben Yair used the technique of issuing a “decree”, while R. Ḥanina ben Dosa did not use any means to deal with the harmful element. He exposed his own body to the injury inflicted by the snake but surprisingly not only was he immune to the snake’s poison rather the snake died, the opposite of nature and of that anticipated. The message conveyed by R. Ḥanina ben Dosa is that when one sins, he is controlled by nature but when one surpasses nature in his conduct he is not controlled by nature.

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<sup>23</sup> On R. Ḥanina b. Dosa see MARGALIOTH, 2000, p. 136-139.

<sup>24</sup> See BABYLONIAN TALMUD, Berakhot 33a. On this story see at length E. NISSAN, 2015-2016, p. 257-294.



The presentation of R. Pinhas ben Yair and R. Hanina ben Dosa's ability to control animals that inflict harm on human beings may have been aimed at showing that there is an alternative to the non-Jewish *habar*. The two stories of Talmudic sages show that also within the Jewish world there are people capable of meeting the need to contend with animal-related hazards. Jewish sages can utilize shake charming but, in contrast to their non-Jewish colleagues, they do this in a permissible way.

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