

RESPONSA

Finding the Source of a Yiddish Proverb

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Q. What is the significance of the Yiddish expression 'Nit yedn purim treft zikh a nes'?

This was a telephone query, received shortly before Purim 5748 (1988). The literal meaning of the saying is "A miracle doesn't happen every Purim," and superficially it seems to refer to the rescue of the Jews of Persia from the murderous intentions of that Biblical arch-villain, Haman. But as in the case of so many reference questions, there is more here than meets the eye.

Collections of Proverbs

The first task was to verify the existence of such a Yiddish saying. The basic source-book for Yiddish proverbs is Ignaz Bernstein's collection, *Yudishe shprikhverter un redensarten* [Yiddish proverbs and sayings]. Bernstein lists ten sayings under the heading "Purim," no. 5 of which reads: *Nit ale Purim treft zikh a nes* (Bernstein, 1908, p. 201). This version of the proverb is identical in meaning to the version given by YIVO's telephone customer. Existence of proverb confirmed; the story does not end here, however.

Bernstein cites a Talmudic saying as the source for this Yiddish proverb: *Lav be-khol sha'ata mitrahesh nisa* (*Megillah* 7b), i.e., "A miracle doesn't happen every hour." Going directly to the source, we find the following Talmudic anecdote (Soncino translation):

Raba said: It is the duty of a man to mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai".

Rabbah and R. Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became mellow, and Rabbah arose and cut R. Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. Next year he said, Will your honour come and we will have the Purim feast together. He replied: A miracle does not take place on every occasion. (*Talmud*, 1961, *Mo'ed* vol. IV, *Megillah* 7b, p. 38)

One can imagine the sarcastic tone with which R. Zera delivered that line, which actually reads *Lav be-khol sha'ata ve-sha'ata mitrahesh nisa* in the original. The fact that Rabbah's prayers helped to revive R. Zera the previous Purim is no guarantee of their success the following Purim, should R. Zera again find himself in the uncomfortable situation of having his throat slit by Rabbah. There are miracles, and then there are "miracles."

This saying is also recorded (under the heading "Miracles") in *A Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, where it is rendered, "Miracles do not happen each day" (Baron, 1956, p. 312). Two Talmudic sources for the saying are given: *Megillah* 7b and *Pesahim* 50b. The context for the latter citation is quite different from the passage in Tractate *Megillah* given above:

Our Rabbis taught: Four *perutoth* [small coins used in Talmudic times] never contain a sign of blessing: the wages of clerks, the wages of interpreters, the profits of orphans, and money that came from oversea countries. As for . . . money which comes from overseas, because a miracle does not occur every day. (*Talmud*, 1961, *Mo'ed* vol. II, *Pesahim* 50b, pp. 245–246)

In an effort to clarify this Talmudic "short-hand," H. Freedman, the translator of this tractate, comments: "Considerable danger attended the transport of freights at sea, and one might very easily suffer loss." In other words, money coming from overseas regularly ended up at the bottom of the sea instead of at its intended destination—hence, its receipt could never be taken for granted. The Aramaic original reads slightly differently from the saying in Tractate *Megillah*: *Lav kol yoma mitrahesh nisa*.

Reuben Alcalay's *Basic Encyclopedia of Jewish Proverbs, Quotations and Folk Wisdom* (1973) is an excellent source of Hebrew proverbs in English translation, and it also includes the Talmudic saying cited by Bernstein as the source for the Yiddish proverb that was the subject of our initial inquiry. Here, under the heading "Miracle," the saying from Tractate *Megillah*

is translated, "A miracle does not happen every hour." Directly underneath this proverb is another popular Talmudic saying, *En somkhin 'al ha-nes* (*Pesahim* 64b), rendered here as, "One must not rely on miracles happening." Freedman translates this saying as "We do not rely on a miracle" (*Talmud*, 1961, *Mo'ed* vol. II, *Pesahim* 64b, p. 325).

Dictionaries

Alcalay, in his *Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary* (1974, col. 1648), records slightly different versions of these two proverbs—*Lo be-khol yom mitrahesh nes* and *En somkhim 'al ha-nes*—without, however, offering sources for them.

Hebrew dictionaries are, in general, a good source for tracking down Biblical sayings and traditional Hebrew and Aramaic proverbs. Avraham Even-Shoshan, in his *Milon hadash*, includes the Hebrew versions of the two sayings that are recorded in Alcalay's *Dictionary*, along with citations for Talmudic tractates and brief explanations. *Lo be-khol yom mitrahesh nes* is explained by Even-Shoshan as follows: "Miraculous events do not happen every day; accordingly, one cannot rely on them." In addition, he cites the Aramaic version of this proverb, as given in Tractate *Pesahim* 50b, but does not mention the variant in *Megillah* 7b, noted by Ignaz Bernstein as the inspiration for the Yiddish saying *Nit ale Purim treft zikh a nes*.

Even-Shoshan explains the saying *En somkhim 'al ha-nes* accordingly: "A person must not neglect making every effort out of the hope that a miracle will happen to him, just as [a miracle] occurred to someone else under similar conditions at a different time" (Even-Shoshan, 1957–8, v. 2, p. 1013, translation mine). In other words, because a miracle happened under similar circumstances in the past, that doesn't mean that a miracle will happen today.

Concordances

Another "keyword approach" to tracing Talmudic proverbs is to consult a concordance. In 1982, a 31-volume concordance to the

Talmud, *Otsar leshon hatalmud*, begun by Chaim Josua Kasowski and continued by his son Biniamin, was finally completed. The Kasowski Talmudic concordance, like Salomon Mandelkern's *Concordance on the Bible* (1955), collates all variants of a word under their Hebrew or Aramaic root, presupposing a certain level of grammatical knowledge on the part of the person consulting the concordance. Thus, the concept of "miracles" is not to be found in either Kasowski's or Mandelkern's concordances under *nes* (*nun-samekh*), but rather under its much rarer tri-consonantal verbal root *nasas* (*nun-samekh-samekh*). Fortunately for those who are not experts in Hebrew grammar, Kasowski gives a cross-reference from *nes* to *nasas* (Kasowski, vol. 26, p. 1409).

Hebrew dictionaries are . . . a good source for tracking down Biblical sayings and traditional Hebrew and Aramaic proverbs.

The saying *Lo be-khol sha'ata ve-sha'ata mitrahash nisa* (*Megillah* 7b) appears in Kasowski's concordance under the sub-heading *Nisa*, together with all other Talmudic expressions using that word. (Kasowski cites this saying as beginning with the word *lo* [*lamed-alef*] and not *lav* [*lamed-alef-vav*]; vol. 26, p. 1427). While Bernstein refers from a Yiddish proverb to its Talmudic source, Kasowski unfortunately does not return the favor!

Talmudic References

For those who, like the author of this column, are relatively untutored in rabbinic literature and are most comfortable working in English, some additional observations concerning Talmudic references and how to locate them now follow.

A citation that reads "*Megillah* 7b" refers to the verso of the seventh leaf of standard printed versions of Tractate *Megillah* from the Babylonian Talmud. *Megillah* belongs to the Order *Mo'ed*, a section of both the Mishnah and Gemara (elaborations on the Mishnah, which together with the Mishnah comprise the Talmud) dealing with the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays and fasts. There are six orders to the Mishnah, and one common way of referring to the entire Talmud is to call it the *Shas*, the Hebrew acronym for *Shishah Sidre Mishnah* [the six orders of the Mishnah]. (According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud comments on only 36 of

the 63 tractates of the Mishnah ("Talmud, Babylonian," *EJ*, vol. 15, col. 768).)

The volumes of the Soncino English translation of the Talmud are not numbered sequentially. Each spine displays only the name of the order and the volume number within that order. Therefore, to select the appropriate volume, one must know that tractate *Megillah* is part of order *Mo'ed*. (At YIVO, we have affixed labels to each volume, listing the tractates contained in it.)

The density of Talmudic text can sometimes make it difficult to track down a quote, even when one has a page reference in hand. The English translation of *Megillah* 7b, for example, ranges from the end of p. 37 to the middle of p. 41 of the Soncino edition, which means that it is necessary to comb through almost four pages of text in order to locate the passage that reads, "A miracle does not take place on every occasion." There may be an easier way: After locating the pages in the Soncino translation that correspond to leaf 7b of Tractate *Megillah* in printed versions of the original Talmud, one can then turn to the *index* to this tractate, which follows the text. (There may be several tractate indexes within a single volume of the Soncino Talmud.) Under the keyword "Miracle," there are six separate page references, only one of which (p. 38) falls within the range of pages covering *Megillah* 7b. That is where the story about Rabbah and R. Zera is to be found. (This technique works well with unambiguous keywords, but not with vague concepts.)

A cumulative index volume to the entire Soncino translation of the Talmud also exists, and there, too, under the heading "Miracles," six references to Tractate *Megillah* are given. (Unfortunately, the page reference for the quotation that we are trying to trace is misprinted in the cumulative index as 35f, instead of 38. *Caveat lector*.) The index volume, which was compiled by Judah J. Slotki, includes a general (subject) index, a list of scriptural (biblical) references appearing in the Talmud, a rabbinical index (rabbis quoted in the Talmud), and a glossary. With the exception of the rabbinical index, all these reference aids also appear at the end of each tractate in the Soncino edition of the Talmud.

Returning to the Yiddish proverb, the saying *Nit ale Purim iz (treft zikh) a nes* is recorded in Nahum Stutchkoff's thesaurus, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (Stutchkoff, 1950, p. 728), along with a number of other sayings pertaining to the Feast of Esther. Both Stutchkoff and Bernstein include a second saying that refers specifically to the miracle of Purim: *Ven ale tog zol zayn*

der nes fun Purim, vos voltn yidn gehat tsu zorn mit zeyere tekhter? This proverb can be translated as follows: "If the miracle of Purim happened every day, would there be any reason for Jews to worry about their daughters?" Bernstein interprets this proverb accordingly: "Since Ahasuerus would have their daughters brought into his harem, parents would be relieved of the burden of raising a dowry." I'm not sure that today's parents would consider that to be such a "miracle."

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