

**When Memory Becomes Reality: What Happened When Honi Awoke
In Memory of Honi**

Onias (April, 65 BCE)

Antiquities 14.2.1 21

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.

Mishna Taanit 3:8:

For every plague—which may the community never be visited with! —an alarm is to be sounded, except for a superabundance of rain. It happened once, that they said to Honi, המעגל, "Pray for us, that rain may fall." He told them, "Go and bring in the Passover ovens, that they may not be spoiled by the rain." He prayed, and the rain did not descend. What did he do then? He marked out a circle, and placing himself within it, thus prayed, "Creator of the world! Your children have looked up to me as being peculiarly favoured by you; I swear, by your Great Name, that I will not move from this place until you will have compassion on your children."

The rain began to drop down [gently]. He said, "It was not for this that I petitioned, but for rain [sufficient to fill] wells, cisterns, and caves." The rain then fell in violent torrents; when he said, "Not for such rains did I petition, but for mild, felicitous, and liberal showers." The rain then fell in the usual manner, until the Israelites of Jerusalem were obliged to go from the city to the Temple mountain, on account of the rain. They came and said to him, "Even as you did pray that the rains might come down, thus pray now that they may cease." He said to them, "Go and see whether the stone טועים is covered by the

משנה מסכת תענית פרק ג משנה ח

[ד] על כל צרה שלא תבא על הצבור מתריעין [עליהן חוץ מרוב גשמים מעשה שאמרו לו לחוני המעגל התפלל שירדו גשמים אמר להם צאו והכניסו תנורי פסחים בשביל שלא ימוקו התפלל ולא ירדו גשמים מה עשה עג עוגה ועמד בתוכה ואמר לפניו רבוננו של עולם בניך שמו פניהם עלי שאני כבן בית לפניך נשבע אני בשמך הגדול שאיני זו מכאן עד שתרחם על בניך התחילו גשמים מנטפין אמר לא כך שאלתי אלא גשמי בורות שיחין ומערות התחילו לירד בזעף אמר לא כך שאלתי אלא גשמי רצון ברכה ונדבה ירדו כתיקנן עד שיצאו ישראל מירושלם להר הבית מפני הגשמים באו ואמרו לו כשם שהתפללת עליהם שירדו כך התפלל שילכו להן אמר להן צאו וראו אם נמחת אבן הטועים שלח לו שמעון בן שטח אלמלא חוני אתה גוזרני עליך נידוי אבל מה אעשה לך שאתה מתחטא לפני המקום ועושה לך רצונך כבן שהוא מתחטא על אביו ועושה לו רצונו ועליך הכתוב אומר (משלי כ"ג) ישמח אביך ואמך ותגל יולדתך

waters." Simeon, son of Shatach sent him word, "If you were not Honi, I would order you to be cursed; but what shall I do to you? Since you sin against God, and yet he forgives and indulges thee like a favoured child, who sins against his father, and is yet forgiven and indulged. To you may be applied the text, 'Your father and mother shall rejoice, and they who begot you shall be glad.' (Prov. 23:25)"

Honi the Circle Drawer – Second Story:

Palestinian Talmud Taanit 3:5-9

Rabbi Yudon ben Geira said: This Honi the Roof-Roller is the grandson of Honi the Roof-Roller who lived close to the destruction of the First Temple. He went out to his workers in the fields. **While he was there it rained.** He went into a cave and sat down, became drowsy and fell asleep and slept for 70 years until the first temple was destroyed and the second temple was rebuilt. After 70 years he awoke from his sleep. He went out from his cave and saw a changed world. A place that was a vineyard had become an olive grove. A place that was an olive grove had become a sown field. He asked, what is going on in the world. They said, do you not know what is going on in the world? He said, No. They said to him, Who are you? He said to them, Honi the Roof-Roller. They said to him: We have heard that when he would go into the courtyard of the Temple it would become light. He went into the courtyard and it became light. He applied to himself the verse “When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.”

Third version:

Taanit 23a

“In their season” means on Wednesday eves, i.e., Tuesday nights, and on Shabbat eves, i.e., Friday nights, because at these times people are not out in the streets, either due to fear of demonic forces that were thought to wander on Tuesday nights or due to the sanctity of Shabbat. As we found in the days of Shimon ben Shetaḥ that rain invariably fell for them on Wednesday eves and on Shabbat eves, until wheat grew as big as kidneys, and barley as big as olive pits, and lentils as golden dinars. And they tied up some of these crops as an example [dugma] for future generations, to convey to them how much damage sin causes, as it is stated: “The Lord our God, Who gives rain, the former rain and the latter rain, in its season that keeps for us the appointed weeks of the harvest. Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withheld the good from you” (Jeremiah 5:24–25). And we likewise found that in the days of Herod that they were occupied in the building of the Temple, and rain would fall at night. And the next day the wind would blow, the clouds would disperse, the sun would shine, and the people would go out to their work. And as rain would fall only at a time when it would not interfere with their labor, the nation knew that the work of Heaven was being performed by their hands. § The mishna taught: An incident occurred in which the people sent a message to Ḥoni HaMe’aggel. This event is related in greater detail in the following *baraita*. The Sages taught: Once, most of the month of Adar had passed but rain had still not fallen. They sent this message to Ḥoni HaMe’aggel: Pray, and rain will fall. He prayed, but no rain fell. He drew a circle in the dust and stood inside it, in the manner that the prophet Habakkuk did, as it is stated: “And I will stand upon my watch and set myself upon the tower, and I will look out to see what He will say to me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved” (Habakkuk 2:1). This verse is taken to mean that Habakkuk fashioned a kind of prison for himself where he sat. Ḥoni said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household.

Therefore, I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until you have mercy upon Your children and answer their prayers for rain. Rain began to trickle down, but only in small droplets. His students said to him: Rabbi, we have seen that you can perform great wonders, but this quantity of rain is not enough to ensure that we will not die. It appears to us that a small amount of rain is falling only to enable you to dissolve your oath, but it is not nearly enough to save us. Honi said to God: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves. Rain began to fall furiously, until each and every drop was as big as the mouth of a barrel, and the Sages estimated that no drop was less than a *log* in size. His students said to him: Rabbi, we have seen that you can call on God to perform miracles and we will not die, but now it appears to us that rain is falling only to destroy the world. Honi again said before God: I did not ask for this harmful rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity. Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner, until all of the people sought higher ground and ascended to the Temple Mount due to the rain. They said to him: Rabbi, just as you prayed that the rains should fall, so too, pray that they should stop. He said to them: This is the tradition that I received, that one does not pray over an excess of good. Honi continued: Nevertheless, bring me a bull. I will sacrifice it as a thanks-offering and pray at the same time. They brought him a bull for a thanks-offering. He placed his two hands on its head and said before God: Master of the Universe, Your nation Israel, whom You brought out of Egypt, cannot bear either an excess of good or an excess of punishment. You grew angry with them and withheld rain, and they are unable to bear it. You bestowed upon them too much good, and they were also unable to bear it. May it be Your will that the rain stop and that there be relief for the world. Immediately, the wind blew, the clouds dispersed, the sun shone, and everyone went out to the fields and gathered for themselves truffles and mushrooms that had sprouted in the strong rain. Shimon ben Shetaḥ relayed to Honi HaMe'aggel: If you were not Honi, I would have decreed ostracism upon you. For were these years like the years of Elijah, when the keys of rain were entrusted in Elijah's hands, and he swore it would not rain, wouldn't the name of Heaven have been desecrated by your oath not to leave the circle until it rained? Once you have pronounced this oath, either yours or Elijah's must be falsified. However, what can I do to you, as you nag God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding. And the son says to his father: Father, take me to be bathed in hot water; wash me with cold water; give me nuts, almonds, peaches, and pomegranates. And his father gives him. About you, the verse states: "Your father and mother will be glad and she who bore you will rejoice" (Proverbs 23:25).

Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a

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 the Lord 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 ass 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 honour due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed [for death] and he died.

Raba said: Hence the saying, Either companionship or death.