

A Legend of Rabba

By Lafcadio Hearn

Which is in the Gemara of the Berachoth of Babylon. . . . Concerning the interpretation of dreams, it hath been said by Rabbi Benaai: "There were in Jerusalem twenty-four interpreters of dreams; and I, having dreamed a dream, did ask the explanation thereof from each of the twenty-four; and, notwithstanding that each gave me a different interpretation, the words of all were fulfilled, even in conformity with the saying: 'All dreams are accomplished according to the interpretation thereof'". . . We are Thine, O King of all; Thine also are our dreams. . . .

Mighty was the knowledge of the great Rabba, to whom the mysteries of the Book Yetzirah were known in such wise, that, being desirous once to try his brother, Rabbi Zira, he did create out of dust a living man, and sent the man to Zira with a message in writing. But inasmuch as the man had not been born of woman, nor had had breathed into him God's holy spirit of life, he could not speak. Therefore, when Rabbi Zira had spoken to him and observed that he did not reply, the Rabbi whispered into his ear: "Thou wert begotten by witchcraft; return to thy form of dust!" And the man crumbled before his sight into shapelessness; and the wind bore the shapelessness away, as smoke is dissipated by a breath of storm. But Rabbi Zira marvelled greatly at the power of the great Rabba.

Not so wise, nevertheless, was Rabba as was Bar-Hedia in the interpretation of dreams; and Bar-Hedia was consulted by the multitudes in those parts. But he interpreted unto them good or evil only as they paid him or did not pay him. According to many Rabbonim, to dream of a well signifieth peace; to dream of a camel, the pardon of iniquities; to dream of goats, a year of fertility; to dream of any living creature, save only the monkey and the elephant, is good; and these also are good if they appear harnessed or bound. But Bar-Hedia interpreted such good omens in the contrary way, unless well paid by the dreamer; and it was thought passing strange that the evils which he predicted never failed of accomplishment.

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Now one day the Rabbonim Abayi and Rabba went to consult Bar-Hedia the interpreter, seeing that they had both dreamed the same dream. Abayi paid him one *zouz*, but Rabba paid him nothing.

And they asked Bar-Hedia, both together saying: "Interpret unto us this dream which we have dreamed. Sleeping, it seemed to us that we beheld a scroll unrolled under a great light, and we did both read therein these words, which are in the fifth book of Moses: "*Thine ox shall be slain before thine eyes, and thou shalt not eat thereof. . . . Thy sons and thy daughters shall be given unto another people. . . . Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in.*"

Then Bar-Hedia, the interpreter, said to Abayi who had paid him one *zouz*: "For thee this dream bodeh good. The verse concerning the ox signifies thou wilt prosper so wondrously that for very joy thou shalt be unable to eat. Thy sons and daughters shall be married in other lands, so that thou wilt be separated from them without grief, knowing them to be virtuous and content.

“But for thee, Rabba, who didst pay me nothing, this dream portendeth evil. Thou shalt be afflicted in such wise that for grief thou canst not eat; thy daughters and sons shall be led into captivity. Abayi shall *carry out much seed into the field*; but the second part of the verse, *Thou shalt gather but little*, refers to thee.”

Then they asked him again, saying: “But in our dream we also read these verses, thus disposed: *Thou shalt have olive trees, and thou shalt not anoint thyself with oil. . . . All the people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of thee.*”

Then said Bar-Hedia: “For thee, Rabbi Abayi, the words signify that thou shalt be prosperous and much honored; but for thee, Rabba, who didst pay me nothing, they portend evil only. Thou shalt have no profit in thy labor; thou shalt be falsely accused, and by reason of the accusation, avoided as one guilty of crime.”

Still Rabba, speaking now for himself alone, continued: “But I dreamed also that I beheld the exterior door of my dwelling fall down, and that my teeth fell out of my mouth. And I dreamed that I saw two doves fly away, and two radishes growing at my feet.”

Again Bar-Hedia answered, saying: “For thee, Rabba, who didst pay me nothing, these things signify evil. The falling of thine outer door augurs the death of thy wife; the loss of thy teeth signifies that thy sons and daughters shall likewise die in their youth. The flight of the doves means that thou shalt be divorced from two other wives, and the two radishes of thy dream foretell that thou wilt receive two blows which thou mayest not return.”

And all things thus foretold by Bar-Hedia came to pass. So that Rabba’s wife died, and that he was arrested upon suspicion of having robbed the treasury of the king, and that the people shunned him as one guilty. Also while seeking to separate two men fighting, who were blind, they struck him twice unknowingly, so that he could not resent it. And misfortunes came to Rabba even as to Job; yet he could resign himself to all save only the death of his young wife, the daughter of Rabbi Hisda.

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At last Rabba paid a great sum to Bar-Hedia, and told him of divers awful dreams which he had had. This time Bar-Hedia predicted happiness for him, and riches, and honors, all of which came to pass according to the words of the interpreter, whereat Rabba marvelled exceedingly.

Now it happened while Rabba and Bar-Hedia were voyaging one day together, that Bar-Hedia let fall his magical book, by whose aid he uttered all his interpretations of dreams; and Rabba, hastily picking it up, perceived these words in the beginning: *All dreams shall be fulfilled according to the interpretation of the interpreter*. So that Rabba, discovering the wicked witchcraft of the man, cursed him, saying: “*Raca!* for all else could I forgive thee, save for the death of my beloved wife, the daughter of Rabbi Hisda! O thou impious magician! take thou my malediction!” . . .

Thereupon Bar-Hedia, terrified, went into voluntary exile among the Romans, vainly hoping thus to expiate his sin, and flee from the consuming power of Rabba’s malediction.

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Thus coming to Rome, he interpreted dreams daily before the date of the king’s treasury; and he did much evil, as he was wont to do before. One day the king’s treasurer came to him, saying:

“I dreamed a dream in which it seemed to me that a needle had entered my finger. Interpret me this dream.”

But Bar-Hedia said only, “Give me a zouz!” And because he would not give it, Bar-Hedia told him nothing.

And another day the treasurer came, saying:

“I dreamed a dream in which it seemed that worms devoured two of my fingers. Interpret me this dream.”

But Bar-Hedia said only, “Give me a zouz!” And because he would not give it, Bar-Hedia told him nothing.

Yet the third time the treasurer came, saying:

“I dreamed a dream in which it seemed to me that worms devoured my whole right hand. Interpret me this dream.”

Then Bar-Hedia mocked him, saying: “Go, look thou at the king’s stores of silk intrusted to thy keeping; for worms have by this time destroyed them utterly.” . . . And it was even as Bar-Hedia said.

Thereupon the king waxed wroth, and ordered the decapitation of the treasurer. But he, protesting, said: “Wherefore slay only me, since the Jew that was first aware of the presence of the worms, said nothing concerning it?”

So they brought in Bar-Hedia, and questioned him. But he mocked the treasurer, and said:

“It was because thou wast too avaricious to pay me one zouz that the king’s silk hath been destroyed.”

Whereupon the Romans, being filled with fury, bent down the tops of two young cedar trees, one toward the other, and fastened them so with a rope. And they bound Bar-Hedia’s right leg to one tree-top, and his left leg to the other; and thereafter severed the rope suddenly with a sword. And the two cedars, as suddenly leaping back to their natural positions, tore asunder the body of Bar-Hedia into equal parts, so that his entrails were spilled out, and even his skull, splitting into halves, emptied of its brain.

For the malediction of the great Rabba was upon him.