



Three Wise-Foolish Questions

Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Chukas | Sichas 2

The Talmud:

Our Sages taught: The wise people of Alexandria asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya three matters of foolishness *{shtus}*...

- a) What is the halacha regarding the wife of Lot, who was turned into a pillar of salt as she fled from the city of Sodom (Genesis 19:26), as to whether she transmits ritual impurity as would a corpse? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: A corpse transmits ritual impurity, but a pillar of salt does not impart ritual impurity.
- b) What is the halacha with regard to the son of the Shunammite woman, who died and was brought to life by Elisha (II Kings 4:33–36), as to whether he transmits ritual impurity as would a corpse? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: A corpse transmits ritual impurity, but a living person does not transmit ritual impurity.
- c) With regard to the dead who will be resurrected in the future, will they require sprinkling with ashes of the Red Heifer on the third and seventh days, like the purification of a person who came into contact with a corpse, or will they not require this sprinkling? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: When they come to life, we will be clever for them and clarify the *halacha*. There are those who say that Rabbi

Yehoshua said to them: When Moses our teacher comes with them, he will tell us the correct *halacha*. (*Niddah* 69b, 70b)

Preface:

Even if the *Talmud* describes a question as foolish, it still has intellectual and spiritual value. If it did not, the Talmud never would have recorded the question for posterity. Questions or hypotheses are only called “foolish” due to an incongruent detail or a misplaced assumption. Thus, we can and must investigate the reasoning of even these “foolish” questions of the Alexandrians.

The Questions:

- a) Why did the Alexandrians ask about the status of the son of the Shunammite after Rabbi Yehoshua clarified that “a corpse transmits ritual impurity, but a pillar of salt does not?” It should have been self-evident that, because he is not a corpse, the resurrected boy does not transmit impurity.
- b) Why did the Alexandrians ask about the Shunammite resurrection performed by Elisha and not the earlier resurrection of a Tzarfatit boy performed by Elijah?
- c) In the final question, why did Rabbi Yehoshua say, “when they come to life, we will be clever for them and clarify the *halacha*,” and not answer simply, “I do not know”?
- d) In the alternative version, “when Moses our teacher **comes with them**,” why is it relevant to mention that Moses come with those who died in the desert?

The Groundwork for the Explanation:

Two factors are present in the impurity conveyed by a corpse: a) The general, pervasive life-force of the soul departs the body (but a partially severed limb that has no potential for healing does not convey impurity,

because a specific, local life-force has departed). b) The body retains the form of a corpse (but a cremated body that loses its bodily form does not convey impurity).

The Alexandrian's questions probed the exact parameters of these factors. As follows.

Lot's Wife:

What is the determining factor in assessing a corpse's impurity? Is it the fact that the soul has departed? Or is impurity conveyed solely because this is a dead body, and the soul's departure is significant only because this is the ultimate cause for this body being dead?

If the determining factor is the soul's departure, then Lot's wife should have conveyed impurity, because her soul did depart. But if impurity is essentially conveyed through a dead body, then Lot's wife should not have conveyed impurity, because there is no corpse to speak of.

This was the Alexandrian's first investigation.

Rabbi Yehoshua's answer, "a pillar of salt does not convey impurity," means that the question is irrelevant because there is no concept of impurity concerning a pillar of salt. Death can only apply to a body; once we are speaking of a pillar of salt, we are no longer discussing death and its resultant impurity. The underlying logic of the question is valid, even compelling, but the subject they applied the question to, Lot's wife, made the question a non-starter. This is why the Talmud calls this query "foolish."

The Son of the Shulamite:

When Elisa resurrected the boy, "He put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands, as he bent over him. And the body of the child became warm." (*Melachim II* 4:34) When Eliyahu resurrected the Tzarfatit boy he prayed, "let this child's life return to his body." (*Kings I* 17:21) This implies that Eliyahu returned the boy's own soul to him, while

Elisha breathed into him some of his soul, his own life force. The question concerns the factor of the soul's departure. Do we say that because his original life-force never returned, his body conveys impurity? Or do we say that the return of a new life-force renders the impurity moot? This question can only be asked concerning the son of the Shunammite, who returned to life not through his own life-force, but through Elisha's.

Rabbi Yehoshua answered, "A corpse transmits ritual impurity, but a living person does not transmit ritual impurity." Again, the question is irrelevant because the concept of impurity applies only to a dead body. Once a body is living, regardless of where that life comes from, it can never be impure. Thus, this question is "foolish" because it is focused on the past, while the present state of the body precludes the possibility of impurity.

The Future Resurrection:

The question here concerns the method of the resurrection: Will the body be rebuilt from some skeletal remains, or will the body be re-created from nothing? If the former, then as the new portion of the body comes to life, it is in contact with the deceased part of the body and should contract impurity from that touch. If the latter, then the new body never came into contact with any "dead" material, and would therefore not contract impurity.

Thus their question: "Will they require sprinkling with ashes of the Red Heifer on the third and seventh days," like one who is purified after coming into contact with a corpse — in this instance, their own corpse.

Rabbi Yehoshua answered: "When they come to life, we will be clever for them and clarify the *halacha*." Meaning, the method of resurrection will only be known when it happens — "when they come to life."

There are Those that Say:

"There are those who say that Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: "When Moses our teacher comes with them, he will tell us the correct *halacha*."

According to this version, the question was slightly different. Regarding the general population, Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that the body is resurrected from the *luz* bone, and therefore the body would require purification. (*Bereishis Rabbah* 28:3) But regarding the generation of the desert, there is a dispute as to whether or not they will merit the World to Come. Rabbi Eliezer maintains they will, while Rabbi Akiva maintains they will not. (*Sanhedrin* 108a) However, Rabbi Akiva's opinion can be explained as follows: The generation of the desert will not be resurrected in their original form, to be rebuilt from their *luz* bone; rather, they will be entirely recreated. Only in their original form "they will not merit the World to Come."

Thus, the Alexandrian's question is who does the law follow? Does it accord with Rabbi Eliezer, meaning that they will contract impurity during their resurrection, or does it accord with Rabbi Akiva, meaning that they will not contract impurity during their recreation?

Rabbi Yehoshua answers (paraphrasing) "If Moses comes with them, we will know the answer." The *Midrash* states that G-d commanded Moses to remain in the desert with his generation. (*Tanchuma, Chukas* 10) If Moses returns with those same people, in their original bodies, then that would indicate that they do merit the World to Come, and they will contract impurity during their resurrection. If Moses does not "come with them," that would indicate that they did not merit the World to Come in their original bodies, and they will be recreated entirely, and thus they will not contract impurity.

The Alexandrians:

It is prohibited to live in Egypt permanently. (*Devarim* 17:16) The Alexandrians originally moved there temporarily, but over time remained there in a more permanent fashion. Their questions were aimed at resolving whether a given status is determined by its original form or its current reality — did they transgress the prohibition because at some point they were considered to be living there permanently, or did they not transgress because they began living there in a permitted, temporary state.

Thus, their questions all were aimed at understanding whether a body in its current form — an “inanimate body” (Lot’s wife), the same body with a new soul (Shunammite), or a new body entirely (the future resurrection) — is connected with its previous status or not.