

The Joy of Talmudic Logic

A young man knocks on the door of a great Talmudic scholar.

"Rabbi, I wish to study Talmud."

"Do you know Aramaic?"

"No."

"Hebrew?"

"No."

"Have you ever studied Torah?"

"No, Rabbi, but I graduated from Harvard summa cum laude in philosophy, and received a PhD from Yale. I'd like to round out my education with a bit of Talmud."

"I doubt that you are ready for Talmud. It is the broadest and deepest of books. If you wish, however, I will examine you in logic, and if you pass the test I will teach you Talmud."

"Good. I'm well versed in logic."

"First question. Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"The burglar with the dirty face."

"Wrong. The one with the clean face. Examine the logic. The burglar with a dirty face looks at the one with a clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with a clean face looks at the burglar with a dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes."

"Very clever. Another question please."

"Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"We established that. The burglar with the clean face washes."

"Wrong. Both wash. Examine the logic. The one with a dirty face thinks his face is clean. The one with a clean face thinks his face is dirty. So the burglar with a clean face washes. When the one with a dirty face sees him washing, however, he realizes his face must be dirty too. Thus both wash."

"I didn't think of that. Please ask me another."

"Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"Well, we know both wash."

"Wrong. Neither washes. Examine the logic. The one with the dirty face thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face thinks his face is dirty. But when clean-face sees that dirty-face doesn't bother to wash, he also doesn't bother. So neither washes. As you can see, you are not ready for Talmud."

"Rabbi, please, give me one more test."

“Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?”

“Neither!”

“Wrong. And perhaps now you will see why Harvard and Yale cannot prepare you for Talmud. Tell me, how is it possible that two men come down the same chimney, and one emerges with a clean face, while the other has a dirty face?”

"But you've just given me four contradictory answers to the same question! That's impossible!"

"No, my son, that's Talmud."

It was Obvious

After months of negotiation with the authorities, a Talmudist from Odessa was finally granted permission to visit Moscow.

He boarded the train and found an empty seat. At the next stop, a young man got on and sat next to him.

The scholar looked at the young man and he thought: This fellow doesn't look like a peasant, so if he is no peasant he probably comes from this district. If he comes from this district, then he must be Jewish because this is, after all, a Jewish district.

But on the other hand, since he is a Jew, where could he be going? I'm the only Jew in our district who has permission to travel to Moscow.

Ahh, wait! Just outside Moscow there is a little village called Samvet, and Jews don't need special permission to go to Samvet.

But why would he travel to Samvet? He is surely going to visit one of the Jewish families there.

But how many Jewish families are there in Samvet? Aha, only two - the Bernsteins and the Steinbergs.

But since the Bernsteins are a terrible family, so such a nice looking fellow like him, he must be visiting the Steinbergs.

But why is he going to the Steinbergs in Samvet? The Steinbergs have only daughters, two of them, so maybe he's their son-in-law.

But if he is, then which daughter did he marry? They say that Sarah Steinberg married a nice lawyer from Budapest, and Esther married a businessman from Zhitomer, so it must be Sarah's husband. Which means that his name is Alexander Cohen, if I'm not mistaken.

But if he came from Budapest, with all the anti-Semitism they have there, he must have changed his name. What's the Hungarian equivalent of Cohen? It is Kovacs.

But since they allowed him to change his name, he must have special status to change it. What could it be? Must be a doctorate from the University. Nothing less would do.

At this point, therefore, the scholar of Talmud turns to the young man and says, "Excuse me. Do you mind if I open the window, Dr. Kovacs?"

"Not at all," answered the startled co-passenger. "But how is it that you know my name?"

"Ahhh," replied the Talmudist, "It was obvious."