

About My Father's Business

Luke 2:49

Yoni ambled down the path that led to the ferry landing. Karon, the ferry driver, had turned in for the night. Karon! What was his real name? Yoni couldn't recall it. Everyone just called him after the mythical *Yevana* ferryman of the dead, to whom you had to pay your *obols* before he'd take you across the River Styx. Karon's price was significantly less. One *lepta* per person. Animals were half that but rounded up. There was never any change in his price. Of course, camels, cattle, and most sheep and goats made the crossing on their own hooves. Camel drivers kept their feet dry, but herdsmen got their feet every bit as muddy as their herd. But it was too much to ask everyone to hitch up their robes and carry their sandals across.

Karon did not own the ferry; it belonged to a rich merchant in Yericho. Every other second day of the week, his agent would hustle down from Yericho to collect the owner's share, except when festivals precluded travel, as had this week. It was up to Karon and his sons, however, to see to everyday operations, maintenance and repair of both the boat, its landings, and the cables that connected them.

The ferry had been there in some form or another for hundreds and hundreds of years. Karon had probably inherited the job of ferryman from his father, who had gotten it from his father, and so forth. Maybe Yoni should ask the man his history. But no matter who was running it, its presence was what made Beit-Abara exist.

Long before this little community had grown up, and before the ferry was even considered, this had been the first place to reliably cross the river north of the Salt Sea. Traditionally this was the exact point where Yeshua had sent the elders with the *arana habrit* down the bank to stop the waters so that *bnei Yisrael* came across dry shod. It was also where Eliyahu was said to have struck the waters with

his rolled-up mantle to cross and climb to the hill at the top of the *wadi* where he was lifted up to heaven. Yoni liked to think that the baptisms he was performing were linked to both events. First, the spiritual sojourner here left his past behind as he followed the Ten Utterances in the *arana* across the last barrier into the promised land, although he had to get wet instead of going over dry shod. Never mind that his baptisms were performed in the old *miqva* that was fed by the pure waters of the spring at the top of the *wadi*. Second, here also he might cross Yardan in the other direction, with the robe of righteousness removing the last barrier, and climb to the hill that led to heaven. As much as Yoni liked the symbolism of this picture, he was unsettled by its incompleteness. In his mind, everything associated with heaven had to be part of some trifecta, some three-part allegory, and his story suffered yet from a missing third leg. Someday he would figure out what it was.

There was nothing missing from the triangle that centered on Beit-Abara, however. Toward the rising sun, just over the mountains, Philadelphia, a newer *Yevana* city, was an easy two-day camel drive away. If you couldn't buy it in Philadelphia, you didn't need it. To the south, skirting along the cliffs at the edge of the Salt Sea, a week of rough going would bring you to Sela. This ancient city had supposedly grown up on the spot where Hagar had fled Sarah's wrath. Now it was the center of Arabi trade as well as its rampant polytheism. Yoni had heard of a sanctuary there, shaped like the camel traders' dice, that housed hundreds of idols. He shuddered to think of the wrath of a single, invisible Elaha upon a place with so many images to so many gods. But they at least provided wonderful incense, much more to his liking than the stuff from Philadelphia. The third leg of the triangle was, of course, Yericho, a half day's journey from here. Yericho had dates, salted fish from Galil, and of course balsam, the fabled 'Balm of Gilead' that was used not only for its fragrance,

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but in medicinal poultices of every kind. And all those silks, incense, fish, and dates had to drive over Karon's ferry and stop for food and drink at Yochaved's hostel.

Yoni stood at the end of the jetty, listening to the low thump of the ferry bumping against the stone in the slow river current. Perhaps the ferry should be left on the opposite bank tonight, in case Yeshu made a late appearance? Karon didn't mind if you used the ferry after hours, if you could pull it across yourself and you left the requisite coins in the dish he kept out on the bench by the toll booth. Yoni fingered the wooden bollard to which the cross-river cable was anchored. It had become as smooth as the polished marble in Horodos' temple. He wondered whether, in his absence from Yerushalayim all these years, if Yeshu had ever done any work on the temple. There was always so much work being done there, both in stone and wood. He had heard that Yeshu was a marvelous stone cutter, specializing in mosaics now. He too had inherited his trade from his father. Yoni wondered how long that had been the family's specialty.

Yoni's mind fled back to the time when he had first met Yeshu in person. They had both been twelve years old, but because of the distance between Natzrat and Yerushalayim, his cousin had not been able to make the journey until now. Because they were both nearing the time for their *bar mitzvah*, their families had sent word to each other that a special celebration was in order.

The seder was especially remarkable that year. Both he and Yeshu were allowed to speak some of the sacred words of the *haggadah* that was normally left to the grownups. He recited the story of the migration out of Mitzrayim while Yeshu led the blessings over the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. After *Pascha*, Yoni had shepherded Yeshu and his little brothers on a walk around the temple grounds and Horodos' palace. He was proud that he knew all the names of everything. He loved seeing Yeshu and Yakov gawk at

how big everything was. They had seldom seen buildings of dressed stone, much less these monumental structures. On the last night, Yeshu prodded his father to allow him to sleep at his cousin's. But the next day, there was some misunderstanding, and no one came for Yeshu before the group left for Galil. It turned out that Yousef thought he gave Yeshu permission to sleep with his cousins at the caravanserai, and assumed Yeshu was among the group as they pulled out the next day. They had not missed him until dinner that day in Shilo. Before they could return to the city the next day, the gates were shut, so it was not until the third day that they were reunited.

During that interval Yoni had to return to his studies at the *beit safar*. Yeshu asked for permission to go with him. Because Yeshu had not learned his letters, being both from the country as well as outside the scribal class, Elisheva was reluctant to let him go, but Zekharyah allowed it.

The *raba* was not particularly happy to allow an illiterate bumpkin into his class and showed it by asking Yeshu to come to the front, hold the *yad*, and recite the text from Moshe's last book, the *Devarim* roll. Yeshu was embarrassed. He knew how to hold the *yad*, and he knew the figures on the roll were letters and words, but they meant nothing to him. While the *raba* did not directly mock him, he made a point of bringing up one of the other boys, several years younger than Yeshu, who took the *yad* and recited the line perfectly. But when he came to *weichonenaich*, he stumbled a bit, trying to inject the proper vowels. At that point, Yeshu volunteered the correct pronunciation flawlessly, and continued with the next passage from memory, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, thine elders, and they will tell thee." The *raba*'s jaw dropped open, and it was several heartbeats before he told Yeshu to go on. Yeshu continued reciting while the *raba* had followed along in the roll,

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checking for accuracy. After four or five lines of text, the *raba* waved his old, trembling hands and said that was enough, and Yeshu was allowed to sit. The *raba* did not call on him again.

The next day, however, there were several *tanna'im* waiting in the classroom. They had been from the *bnei Bathyra*, who had been ousted from the leadership position in Yerushalayim around the time Yoni had been born. They were itching to find a way back into power, so they investigated every irregularity or portent. An illiterate country boy reciting scripture was something that warranted immediate investigation, if only to ferret out some malign power among them.

“Where did you learn to read, boy?” *tanna* Gershon asked him brusquely.

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I cannot read,” Yeshu said meekly. “I thought that had been demonstrated yesterday.”

“Don’t get saucy with us, boy” *tanna* Malkiel snapped. “Clearly you recited a long passage from *Torah* yesterday.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, “But I was just repeating what my own *raba* in Natzrat had read once.”

“Once?” Gershon asked. “He recited it once? And you remember it perfectly?”

“Yes sir, I can remember everything I hear.” It was true, Yoni thought. Just the night before they had stayed up late with Yoni crafting the best gibberish he could come up with, and Yeshu spouting it right back at him.

“Anything? You can perfectly recall anything that you hear?” Gershon was incredulous.

“Well, as long as I’m paying close attention,” Yeshu admitted. “I don’t remember everything I ever hear.”

“Well, how about this,” Eleazar had challenged: “*Ve’al taarbee shayacha im ha’ishya. bee’ishemto amru, kal vachomer bee’eshuet havero. mikhan amru hahamim, khalzman shue’adam marbee shayacha im ha’ishya, gorem ra’aleatzmo, uvotel middevari tora, vesofo yoresh gaeheynom.*”

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Yeshu knitted his brows together and been silent for a long enough moment that Eleazar thought he had won.
“Too much for you?”

“No sir,” Yeshu answered. “But it is not from *Torah*, and I have not heard it before.”

“Yose ben Yochanan was a wise man, nonetheless,” Eleazar intoned. “Go on boy, repeat it, if you can.”

“But I do not like to say things that are stupid,” Yeshu said simply and innocently.

Eleazar was incensed. He stepped close to Yeshu, bent down and slapped his cheek sharply. “How dare you, a little boy, pronounce judgment on the sages. Now, do as you’re told and repeat Yose’s wise words.”

Without flinching from the sting on his cheek, Yeshu squared his shoulders and said “Let thy house be wide open, and let the poor members of thy household engage not in too much conversation with women. This with regard to one’s own wife, how much more does the rule apply with regard to another man’s wife. As long as a man engages in too much conversation with women, he causes evil to himself, he neglects the study of the Torah, and in the end, he will inherit the fire.”

Yoni saw Eleazar’s eyes grew wider with amazement at each sentence Yeshu uttered. He had clearly been bested. But Yoni knew that Eleazar would not let it go.

“Why do you call that saying stupid, boy?” he snarled at the end of the recitation. “Tell me how you think Yose spoke amiss.”

“Did not Yose have a mother?” Yeshu quietly asked in return.

Eleazar had been dumbfounded. Then, defensively, he became annoyed. “Boys listen to their mothers. But men do not. You don’t know this yet because you are not yet a man. If you are a hundredth part as wise as Yose, maybe you will learn that someday.”

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“You do not think it important to converse with your wife then, noble sir?” Yeshu asked.

“Of course not,” he had almost shouted. “What does she know about the law or the prophets?”

“Perhaps not much, but she may have told you about the rip in your robe that is revealing more of yourself than you should in public.” Yeshu held out his upturned hand, gesturing toward Eleazar’s crotch. “My mother has said things wiser than I have heard here. And when the time comes for me to marry, I hope to get a girl who isn’t stupid or afraid of me, like...” his voice trailed off.

Eleazar turned a deep crimson, clutched at his robes, and stormed out of the courtyard, surrounded by stunned silence from some of the *tanna’im*, and loud guffaws from others. Yoni remembered desperately trying not to burst out in laughter and having to grasp his mouth tightly.

One of the hooting laughs turned into the voice of Gamaliel, one of the *Bathyra*’s chief antagonists, Hillel’s own grandson. What was *he* doing here? He did not look as though he wanted to grill Yeshu so much as to continue putting the *Bathyra’im* to shame. He called out “*Minin aeide, thea, Piliadeo Achilius.*” After a condescending look at the others, he turned a patronizing glance at Yeshu. “Can you say that?”

“Sir, that is *Yevana*,” Yeshu had responded. “Are such words allowed in *beit safer*?”

“Never mind what tongue it is, can you say it?” Gamaliel encouraged, looking to his opponents, daring them to intercede.

Yeshu repeated it word for word, as far as anyone of these conservative *Yehudaya* could tell. Then he said “And the *targum*, if I may use that word, has something to do with a goddess singing about the rage of a man named Achilius son of Pilios? I do not know who these men are, nor do I believe in goddesses, but that is what you said.”

Gamaliel stepped forward, knelt, smoothed Yeshu's cheek and then tousled his hair. "Never you mind goddesses or heroes," he chuckled. "And if your mother taught you to think and to speak like this, then you listen to her every word. Not just until your *bar Mitzvah*, what, next year? No, you follow and take care of that woman the rest of your days, my young man." As he stood up and looked back to his retinue, he said a little more loudly. "Are you able to attend to me tomorrow morning?"

Yeshu and Yoni shared bewildered glances and shrugged shoulders. But Yoni motioned for him to go on. "Yes, sir," Yeshu had answered. "How early, sir?"

"Come share my breakfast after morning prayers," he smiled graciously, looking around at the other elders with savage eyes. "And since you probably cannot be separated, bring your..."

"Cousin," shouted Yoni, unable to restrain himself.

"Bring your cousin with you. I shall see to it that we have enough bread and cheese for two young appetites." With that, Gamaliel turned on his heel and paraded off, followed by his retinue in close formation. The *Bathyra'im* in their turn stormed out, leaving Yeshu and Yoni alone among a few, much older *tanna'im*. They motioned the boys to come sit next to them in the shade. These men were wise enough not to demand the boy perform, but made themselves available to answer whatever questions he might have. Yeshu could not be stopped. What was the exact process of killing and sacrificing the different animals? What did they do with all the blood that was shed? Where did they get the water to fill the basin? How did they keep it clean? Eventually, when Zekharyah came to the school to fetch Yoni home for dinner, there were only two of the oldest sages left.

Yoni laid awake in his bed that he shared with Yeshu long after his cousin had surrendered to sleep. How did he do it? The memorization part aside, how did he know what

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to question? In Yoni's mind, you didn't question things like the sacrifice. You just learned how to do it perfectly. That's what his father had taught him. Precision. No mistakes. Word for word. Yeshu knew all the words. He might not know all the motions, but he wanted to know. And more importantly, he wanted to know why. And Yeshu wasn't just wanting to know what the ancient sages had said nor what was written in *Torah*. He wanted someone to interpret afresh the meaning of, well, everything. That was the night Yoni's own life changed. No longer would he seek to give just the expected answer. No longer was it sufficient to be thought of the boy who could advance to fill his father's shoes because he was every bit as knowledgeable, practiced, and polished as Zekharyah. From now on he would not be afraid to figure things out for himself.

He remembered that time when he and some other boys had ventured out to Mount Zion on a winter's afternoon and found a rotting tree. He wondered what was underneath, so had picked up a thick piece of damp, crumbling wood. Underneath he found ugly grubs and spiders. The wood went flying, and he jumped back, brushing dirt from his tunic. He vowed never again to investigate such things. But now, when it came to matters in *beit safer*, he would not be afraid to turn over every branch, root, and stone to find for himself what was under there.

The next day, Zekharyah accompanied the two boys to breakfast with Gamaliel, leaving word with Elisheva to send Yeshu's parents there, as they were expected to arrive soon. The bread was the finest Yoni had ever had, absolutely no grit in the flour. The cheese had just the right amount of bite and salt. And there were fresh pomegranates! Gamaliel's teenage son, Shimon, who had not been present the day before, took up questioning Yeshu and evaluating his answers.

Then Yeshu's parents rushed into the room, flustered and embarrassed to have found their son in the presence of such exalted people. "You will excuse us, most gracious sirs," Yousef had stuttered, bowing and covering his head with his hands. "I am but a humble craftsman and this is my son. We have come a long way to bring him back home."

Yeshu rushed to his mother's outstretched arms. Her eyes were wet with tears, and her whole body quivered. "My son," she scolded through her tears, "why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."

"Searching?" Yeshu pulled his head from his mother's embrace and put a hand to her cheek. "Didn't Elisheva tell you to find me here in my Father's house?"

"Your father's house?" Miryam laughed incredulously. "That is where you should have been, yes. But," her voice trailed off, and a faraway look came into her eye. But when she looked back at Yeshu, she saw no hint of deeper meaning in his eyes.

"I am sorry, mother," he said as he pushed his face into her shoulder. "I am sorry we misunderstood each other. But you had no need to worry. I was here in this wonderful place, the Father's home on earth, each day. I have learned so much..."

Shimon interrupted the tender reunion "But your father is a craftsman, no?" Turning to Yousef, he said, "Your son has demonstrated astute learning abilities, talents that go far beyond what are needed in your business. Maybe you should consider leaving him here to study? Doesn't this," he said to Yeshu, motioning to the desk with its rolls, carpet draped walls, and rich food, "have more appeal than, what, a stone worker? A carpenter? A boat builder?"

Yeshu craned his head back toward Shimon and said "Does not Moshe say *Do ye thus requite Adonai, O foolish people and unwise? Is not He thy father that hath gotten*

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thee? Hath He not made thee, and established thee? Wise sir, while I have been here, I *have* attended to the Father's business." He paused to extricate himself from his mother's clutches and to place his hand on his father's arm. "I see no shame in continuing to follow my father, whom the Father has ordained, and learn his business."

An uncomfortable silence followed for a few heartbeats, until Miryam grabbed Yeshu's chin, looked into his eyes, and motioned to Shimon. Yeshu nodded and bowed, then returned to Shimon's table. "*The beneficent soul shall be made rich, and he that satisfies abundantly shall be satisfied also himself,*" he quoted from the Writings. "I thank you for sharing your time, your wisdom, and your food with me."

Whatever prickliness had arisen in Shimon from Yeshu's refusal of tutelage was melted away by his show of graciousness. "*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that is wise wins souls,*" he replied from the same book.

"Yeshueh, this must be your mother?" Gamaliel asked. "Are you going to introduce us?"

But before Yeshu could even open his mouth, Miryam was already replying. "There is no need of introduction, *raba* We have already been introduced, Mali ben Shimon. You have only forgotten."

A confused look clouded Galamiel's face. He leaned forward to focus on Miryam's face. Suddenly his eyes flew wide, and a smile brightened his entire face. "Miryam bat Yehoyakim! Of course! Who else could have raised this amazing boy?"

Yeshu and Yoni exchanged bewildered glances. How could these two know each other? He was the most respected doctor of the law in the world's very navel, and she was a peasant woman from a distant farming village. But when they looked to Miryam and Yousef, they both beamed at having been recognized.

“We served together in the temple years ago,” Miryam explained. “After I was betrothed to Yousef, my parents sent me here to live with Elisheva. I worked with her at the temple distributing the sacrifices and washing the linens and such. Mali...” She paused for a moment in embarrassment and then corrected herself. “Rabban Gamaliel was a young doctor at the time, and he was very kind to me.”

Yoni was suddenly aware that Yeshu had turned his full attention on Gamaliel with a look of doubt on his face, as if he suddenly suspected the man of something untoward. But as Yoni himself regarded the looks on all the other adult faces, he could discern no hidden glances or shifting eyes.

“Miryam served here with dignity and distinction,” Gamaliel responded. “I was sorry to see her leave, and so abruptly. But it appears her departure has led to even greater things,” he said, graciously motioning to Yousef. “You have sired a remarkable son. How full is the rest of your quiver, my good man?”

“There are as yet six polished arrows there,” Yousef replied humbly, while obviously being proud within. “Perhaps more will come?”

“And your craft?” Gamaliel inquired.

“I am a stonemason,” Yousef replied.

“Then may your sons and your daughter’s sons yet build palaces for kings with many, many rooms,” Gamaliel blessed him. “But in the meantime, your son here seems to have quite an appetite for my bread and cheese. May I send some with you on your journey home?”

Gamaliel then motioned to his son, whose face was blank for a moment, until he realized that he was being told to send some vittles with the departing party. Shimon in turn motioned to the servants to pack up the remaining food. Before they could get far, however, another servant who had apparently anticipated his master’s hospitality, appeared with a parcel already wrapped up.

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Zekharyah had then excused them all and ushered out of the room. Yeshu and Yoni shared a quick goodbye, and he had been rushed out of the city to disappear back into the countryside. Yoni had not seen him again for two years, and that was the last time he had seen him.

As he gazed out into the darkened desert, he wondered if he would see him soon. But even as he gazed, the fire suddenly billowed to a life of its own behind him, and he laughed out loud and called back up to the courtyard “Ram, stop blowing. Look what you’ve done!” By the time he had walked back up the switchback incline, the boy had started dancing merrily around the fire singing a little song.

“Andreas, I’m worried this fire might not be enough,” he said in a low voice as he turned and found Andreas sitting on a palm trunk. “I’m worried that there may be *ganvayya* out there, and Yeshu may have his Miri with him. Go wake up Shem. Take him and Ezra. Grab some torches and stout sticks and head up the road to Yericho.”

“And do what?” blurted Andreas, fully surprised and more than a little anxious.

“Just go out there and make some noise. If there are *ganvayya* out there tracking Yeshu and Miri, the sound of those two monsters and you will be sure to scare them off.” Yoni watched as Andreas stared at him with open mouth for a few moments, then looked down, shut his mouth, and headed off to rouse Shem and Ezra.

Yoni quietly chanted to himself, “*Yevarechech yrhovaha veyishemamerich...*” as the three of them lit torches at the pyre and headed down to the crossing with much noise already. “Adonai bless and protect you, Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you, Adonai bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!”