

From the Pages of Tradition

JUDITH ISH-KISHOR: *THIS TOO SHALL PASS*

“This too shall pass (Hebrew: גם זה יעבור)” is an adage that has provided succor for many a person in distress. It is a powerful reminder that life does not stand still, and that one must always anticipate change, hopefully for the better.

Much mystery surrounds this adage. We know almost nothing about its origin, whether in its Hebrew or non-Hebrew versions.¹ Surprisingly, the phrase “this too shall pass” occurs nowhere in Scripture, Talmud, or Midrash. Indeed, it seems to appear nowhere in all of Jewish literature prior to the nineteenth century.² In that century, the phrase was attributed—apparently in non-Jewish sources—to King Solomon.³ In the twentieth century, the connection to King Solomon became part of an elaborate legend that was often told, but rarely recorded.⁴ Judith Ish-Kishor’s version of the legend is a masterpiece of Jewish folklore. It remains unsurpassed as the consummate retelling of a Jewish legend that edifies even as it entertains.⁵

Born in Boston (circa 1895), and raised in London, Judith Ish-Kishor was the eldest of eight children. She returned to the U.S. and studied at Hunter College in New York. She was a pioneer writer of juvenile literature for Jewish children in America. Her best known works are *Adventure in Palestine: The Search for Aleezah* (1947); *Joel is the Youngest* (1954); and *Tales From the Wise Men of Israel* (1962). Her syndicated column for Jewish children, entitled *The Sabbath Angel*, was a staple feature of the Anglo-Jewish press. Her father, Ephraim Ish-Kishor, was a noted Zionist leader who attended the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. Her sister, Sulamith Ish-Kishor, was also a prominent author of juvenile literature for Jewish children in America. Judith Ish-Kishor was married to Herbert Lapides and died in New York in 1971.⁶

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TRADITION

Of all King Solomon's servants, the bravest and most faithful was Benaiah,⁷ the captain of the guard.⁸ He had been the King's companion in the fabulous adventures of his earlier days and more than once had saved his master's life. He had never failed in any task that Solomon had set [for] him.

This, indeed, was his only boast; for Benaiah was a man of action, not fond of talking. When he was not on duty guarding the King, he would sit among the courtiers so silent that they made the mistake of thinking him dull. They would tease him; but Benaiah, sure of his place with the King, paid no attention to them.

Once, however, Solomon took part in a mischievous trick they were playing on his faithful follower. "Benaiah," he said one Sabbath evening early in spring, "you are fond of saying that you have never failed in any task for me."

Benaiah bowed respectfully. "That is my only boast, O King."

"Then let me put you to one more test. I want you to find me a certain wonderful ring, so that I can wear it at the Succoth festival. That will give you six months for the search."

"If the ring exists under Heaven, my lord, you shall have it! But tell me, I pray, what makes it so precious?"

"It has magic powers," said the King. "If a happy man looks at it, he at once becomes downcast and gloomy; but if a person in misery or mourning beholds it, hope rises in his heart and he is comforted." Now King Solomon knew that there was no such ring. But he met Benaiah's eager gaze with a smile of encouragement.

"You shall wear it at the Succoth feast," Benaiah exclaimed, "if there be any strength left in me!"

He could hardly wait for the Sabbath to be over, so that he could start on his quest.

First he went to the finest jewelers and goldsmiths and silversmiths in Jerusalem, for he didn't know whether the ring was of silver or gold, set with precious stones or plain. To each man he described its magic qualities, but no one knew anything about it. They had not even heard of such a ring. Benaiah also tried the smaller shops and less prosperous dealers. Always he met the same raised eyebrows, the same shake of the head.

Ah, this ring must be treasured in some far-off city, thought Benaiah.

When the great caravans came southward from Babylon and Damascus and Tyre, he was the first to meet them, and he spoke to the

traders in precious gems, and said: "I am seeking a ring with this magic quality: When a happy person looks at it, he becomes sad; and when a wretched man beholds it, he ceases to grieve and is comforted. Do you have it? I will pay any price. It is for my lord, King Solomon."

These widely traveled merchants also shook their heads. Each told him, "I regret, Captain, that I have no such ring. It may not even exist, for I have never heard of it. I have other rare jewels that will surely please—"

"Look for this ring, I pray you," said Benaiah firmly. "If you have it for me on your return journey, you may name your own price."

He went to Beersheba in the south, to meet the caravans that came up from the cities of Egypt, and from Yemen, the land of perfumes. He asked the jewel merchants: "Can you find me a ring which has the wonderful power of changing a man's grief to joy when he beholds it? Also, it changes happiness to sorrow at a glance."

"Wonderful, indeed!" they answered, "if such a ring exists. But we have not heard of it."

"It exists," said Benaiah. "My lord, King Solomon wishes for it. You shall have any price you ask if you bring me that ring on your return."

He went down to Jaffa, where the ships came in from the Great Sea and the Ocean of Darkness, in the west, and the Spice Islands and the Land of Ophir, to the east and south. To each merchant he said, "I seek a magic ring. It makes a mourner forget his grief, when he looks at it; but when a happy man sees it, his heart sinks and there is no joy in him. I will pay a great price for it."

And each one answered him, "I know of no such ring. You are the first to tell me of it."

"Then seek it in all lands where you travel. For if you bring it to me on your return, you may ask what you wish in payment."

Benaiah thought, How wise is my lord, the King! He knows the things hidden from other men, even at the ends of the earth!

Meanwhile weeks, then months, went by. It was summer. The caravans returned from the north. None of the merchants brought him the ring, or even any word of where it might be found. The caravans came again from the south. "We would gladly help you," the dealers said, "but in all the cities and the markets where we sought it, we have seen no such ring. Nor have we heard tell of it."

Summer was over. One by one the ships returned from prosperous voyages over calm waters, and each of the sea captains and the mer-

TRADITION

chant-adventurers told Benaiah the same disheartening tale. They had not seen such a ring. No one had heard of it.

The last harvest of the year, and with it the Succoth festival, was approaching. Every time King Solomon saw Benaiah, he would say: "Well, how goes the search, Benaiah? Have you found the ring?" And when Benaiah shook his head, Solomon said with a pleasant smile, "Search diligently, Benaiah. You will surely find it."

But as the days went by and brought no good news, he began to avoid the places where he might meet the King.

Now it was only a week before Succoth. There was no more hope in Benaiah's heart. He could not eat and his nights were sleepless. He dreaded the moment when he must tell the King he had failed. He did not mind so much that the clever courtiers would laugh at him. But he could not bear to have the King's trust in him shaken.

It was the last night before Succoth Eve. Benaiah lay restless on his bed for several hours; then he rose and dressed and walked about the silent city, hardly knowing where he went. He wandered away from the palace, and the fine houses of the courtiers and those who served the King, through the neighborhoods where the plain people lived.

Night faded from the sky and the east brightened with the rosy fire of dawn as Benaiah went downward from street to street, until he reached the bottom of the valley between the two hills on which Jerusalem was built.

Benaiah looked about him. It was a poor street, with small shabby houses. As the sun rose, people in patched and faded garments came out of their dwellings and set about the morning's business.

Benaiah saw a young man spread a mat upon the moss-grown paving-stones in front of his home, and arrange on it some baskets of silver and turquoise trinkets and mother-of-pearl beads such as people without much money could afford.

Shall I ask here? thought Benaiah. What use, when even the most famous travelers have never heard of the ring?—Still, it will only mean another No.

He approached the jeweler. "I want a ring," he said, repeating the words that had lost their meaning for him. "A wonderful ring. It has magic powers. When a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad. When a grieving person sees it, he becomes joyful. Do you have it?"

The young man shook his head. "This is a poor little place, O Captain, and we know nothing of such marvels. . . ."

Benaiah walked away.

But meanwhile the jeweler's old grandfather had come out to sit by the doorway in the early sunshine. He beckoned the young man to him and whispered in his ear.

"Wait, Captain!" the jeweler called out, "I think we can serve you." Hardly able to believe his ears, Benaiah turned back.

The young man took from one of the baskets a plain gold ring, such as used for weddings. With a sharp tool he engraved something on it and laid it in the captain's hand.

Benaiah looked at it, and he laughed aloud. His heart filled with joy. He had not been so happy since the day he first started the search. "This is the ring!" he cried, and gave the young jeweler all the money in his purse. "Come to the palace and you shall have more," he added, "for I cannot thank you enough."

He hurried back to his house but was too impatient to sleep. However, he kept out of the King's sight, not to betray his happy secret until the right time should come. He bathed and made ready for the festival. Then in his finest holiday attire he took his place at the banquet table.

He enjoyed the feast, for now that his duty was done he could pay attention to such matters as food and drink. He laughed at every joke, and thought kindly of the clever young courtiers.

When the merriment was at its height, King Solomon turned to Benaiah. A hush spread around the table. "Now, my faithful Captain," the King exclaimed mirthfully, "where is the famous ring?" Of course, after he and the courtiers had laughed for a while at Benaiah's simplicity, Solomon meant to tell him that he had not failed, for no such ring existed.

But to Solomon's astonishment, Benaiah cried: "I have it, O King! It is here." And, almost stumbling in his haste to reach the King's side, he placed it on Solomon's hand.

As the King looked at it, the teasing laughter faded from his face. He became silent and thoughtful, for the magic of the ring was working. The jeweler had engraved on it three Hebrew letters, *Gimmel, Zayin, Yud*, standing for the words *Gam Zeh Ya'avor*—"This, too, shall pass." Thus King Solomon was sharply reminded that all his glory, and the beauty and splendor with which he was surrounded, must crumble away into dust, leaving at last nothing but an old memory and a tale that is told.

When he raised his eyes again, they met Benaiah's with a humbled, grateful look. He was ashamed of the trick he had played on his loyal follower.

TRADITION

“Benaiah,” he said, “you are not only as faithful, but wiser than I thought you. This is a wonderful gift. I shall wear it on the same finger as my signet.” He drew from his hand a ring with a precious ruby. “And you, in return, must wear this ruby, so that all men may know you as the King’s friend.”

NOTES

1. See Archer Taylor, “This Too Will Pass,” in F. Harkort et al, eds., *Volksüberlieferung* (Kurt Ranke Festschrift), Göttingen, 1968, pp. 345-50, and the sources cited in Dan Ben-Amos, ed., *Folktales of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 324-35.
2. It is first mentioned in Y. Mezah, אוצר חדש, Vilna, 1898, p. 13. For another early reference, see R. Yosef Hayyim, ערך יוסף חי: הלכות, [first edition: Jerusalem, 1910], Jerusalem, 1987, p. 197.
3. See, e.g., E. Fitzgerald, *Polonius*, London, 1852, p. 110:

Solomon’s Seal: The Sultan asked Solomon for a signet motto that should hold for adversity or prosperity. Solomon gave him “This also shall pass away.”

Cf. Abraham Lincoln’s version (where Solomon is not mentioned; instead, reference is made to an “Eastern” monarch):

It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: “And this, too, shall pass away.” How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction!

See Lincoln’s “Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin” (September 30, 1859) in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, New Brunswick, 1953, vol. 3, pp. 481-2.

4. See the references cited below in note 8. It is noteworthy that the legend is not recorded in Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1909-1938, 7 volumes.
5. Judith Ish-Kishor, “King Solomon’s Ring,” in her *Tales from the Wise Men of Israel*, J.B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 19-26. We are grateful to HarperCollins Publishers for granting us permission to reprint the story.
6. Sadly, Judith Ish-Kishor is not mentioned in any of the editions of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. She goes unmentioned in Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, eds., *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (New York, 1997, 2 vols.), as well. Given her low profile in

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the Jewish historical literature, we thought it appropriate to reproduce here—in part—a letter she wrote and sent to *The New York Times* in 1936. At the time, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was looking for a successor to Arturo Toscanini. The German conductor, Wilhelm Furtwaengler—who was considered by many to be a Nazi sympathizer—was a candidate for the post. The letter was printed by the *Times* in its March 15, 1936 issue. It reads:

To the Music Editor:

For the past ten years I have held a double subscription to the Philharmonic Orchestra. I shall have no regrets in canceling if the appointment of Furtwaengler is maintained, as it is obvious that Nazism and not the spirit of music will dominate the atmosphere of the Philharmonic in the future.

As one of the sex that the Nazis have submerged, as a member of the race which they abuse, as a writer feeling for those German writers who have been gagged, and finally as a music-lover, I should find it impossible to enjoy music under the baton of one who is hand in hand with the Nazis.

It is a stunning shock to find that the sanctuary of music in America has been successfully invaded by the hordes of Hitler.

Judith Ish-Kishor
New York, March 9, 1936

7. II Samuel 8:18.
8. In the earlier Jewish versions of the legend, no mention is made of Benaiah. See, for example, the Hebrew version of the story in R. Meir Zvi Zachman, *חידושי תורה*, Munkatch, 1928, pp. 88-92, where Rehoboam [II Kings 11:43] is featured prominently, rather than Benaiah. Daniel Persky's Hebrew version in *הדאר* 24:27 (May 25, 1945), p. 572, is a masterful reworking of the Zachman account. Did Ish-Kishor invent this part of the legend, or is it part of the "oral tradition" she heard from others? The blurb on the back cover of *Tales From the Wise Men of Israel* indicates that many of the stories recorded by Judith Ish-Kishor "came to her by word of mouth."