



## Rabbi Yishmael's Statement

*Judaism*

In the Gemara it is said that Rabbi Yishmael ben Yose was once walking along a road when he suddenly came across a man carrying a bundle of heavy firewood. The man, exhausted, went to the side of the road, placed his load on the ground and sat down to rest for a few moments.

'Sir,' the man suddenly said to Rabbi Yishmael as he walked past him, 'could you help me and put this bundle of firewood on my back?'

Rabbi Yishmael stopped and asked him:

'How much do you want for the firewood? I'll buy it.'

The man, surprised by the proposal, took a little while to answer.

'Half a dinar,' he finally said.

Rabbi Yishmael gave him the half dinar and said to him:

'Leave the firewood there, please. Since the firewood now belongs to me, I want to give it to any poor person who needs to heat their home and claims it.'

But then the man with the firewood said, as he stood up:

'I claim it! I'm poor,' he explained, 'so I've the same right as anyone else. I claim the firewood for myself!'

And in response to the rabbi's expression of disbelief, he added:

'And now, can you help me put the bundle of firewood on my back?'



Rabbi Yishmael gave the man half a dinar more and this time he said:

‘Leave the bundle of firewood there, and since it now belongs to me again, I declare that any poor person has the right to take this bundle ... any *except you.*’ □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022).

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## Comments

This parable belongs to the Talmud (Baba Metzia 30b), a traditional body of Hebrew texts containing the laws, customs and traditions, narratives and legends of Judaism from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., which in the Jewish tradition is a kind of civil and religious code. Originally, what is contained in these texts was the ancient oral tradition of Judaism which, when its transmission was endangered after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., was written down in what is now known as the Talmud. It is divided into two parts: the Mishnah, which is the fundamental text, and the Gemara, which is the section which comments on, and analyses, each section of the Mishnah.

Rabbi Yishmael ben Yose was a rabbi of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., son of the also Rabbi Yose ben Chalafta, being the fifth generation of rabbinic sages – *Tannaim* – whose opinions were recorded in the Mishnah. It is said that he could recite the entire Bible by heart, and that he was a judge of absolute integrity, as well as being humble and modest in appearance.

## Sources

Bleefeld, B. R. and Shook, R. L. (1998). *Saving the World Entire: And 100 Other Beloved Parables from the Talmud*. New York: Plume.

Steinsaltz, A. (trans.) (2012). *The William Davidson Talmud*. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers. Available on Sefaria.org, [https://www.sefaria.org/Bava\\_Metzia.30b.7](https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metzia.30b.7)

### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 13a: Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- Fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living. We must realize that when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.