

Chavruta: Study in Pairs

You do not have to answer every question. Start with what pulls you.

1. Honi is distressed by the words, “we were like those who dream.” What dream, or seventy-year stretch of Jewish history, do you carry that still feels hard to believe happened?
2. The planter says, “Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.” Where in your life are you benefiting from someone else’s planting? Where are you the planter?
3. Honi asks a fair question: how can you plant what you will never see? What would you answer him, in your own words?
4. When Honi wakes, the tree is bearing fruit, but his friends and peers are gone. What does he lose, and what does he gain, by sleeping through seventy years?
5. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers planted things in hundreds of towns in Poland and beyond. Some they lived to see grow. Many they did not. Which of their plantings are you, here on this trip, standing in the shade of?

1. The Verse That Haunted Him

The Gemara relates another story about Ḥoni HaMe'aggel. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: All the days of the life of that righteous man, Ḥoni, he was distressed over the meaning of this verse: “A song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream” (Psalms 126:1). He said to himself: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years? How is it possible to compare the seventy-year exile in Babylonia to a dream?

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל ימיו של אותו צדיק, היה מצטער על מקרא זה: “שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחלמים”,
אמר: מי איכא דננים שבועין שנין בחלמא?

2. The Carob Tree

One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Ḥoni said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Ḥoni said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. **Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.**

יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא, חזייה להווא גבכא דהנה נטע חרובא, אמר ליה: האי, עד כמה שנין טעין? אמר ליה: עד שבועין שנין. אמר ליה: פשיטא לך דחייית שבועין שנין? אמר ליה: אנא חרובא בעלמא אשכחיה. כי היכי דשתלו לי אבהתי — שתלי נמי לבראי.

3. Seventy Years

Ḥoni sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Ḥoni said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son. Ḥoni said to him: I can learn from this that I have slept for seventy years, and indeed he saw that his donkey had sired several herds during those many years.

יתיב, קא פריך ריפתא, אתאי ליה שינתא, נים. אהדרכא ליה משוניתא, איכסי מעינא, ונים שבועין שנין. כי קם, חזייה להווא גבכא דהווא קא מלקט מינייהו, אמר ליה: אתה הוא דשתלתיה? אמר ליה: בר בריה אנא. אמר ליה: שמע מינה דנימי שבועין שנין. חזא לחמור[ת]יה דאתיילידא ליה במכי במכי.

A Closing Thought

The planter planted for his grandchildren. His grandchildren harvested the fruit. The one who asked the question, *will you live to see it?*, slept through the answer. The planter never said anything clever. He said only what any Jew, in any century, has had to say to keep the world going: **Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.**