YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

**Shiur #20: The Firing and Rehiring of R. Gamliel**

The Rabbis taught: There was a story in which a student came before R. Yehoshua. He said to him: “Is the evening prayer optional or mandatory?” He said to him: “It is optional.” He came before R. Gamliel. He said to him: “Is the evening prayer optional or mandatory?” He said to him: “It is mandatory.” He said to him: “But did R. Yehoshua not say to me that it is optional?” He said to him: “Wait until the shield bearers enter the study hall.” When the shield bearers entered, the questioner stood up and asked: “Is the evening prayer optional or mandatory?” R. Gamliel said to him: “It is mandatory.” R. Gamliel said to the sages: “Is there anyone who disagrees with this?” R. Yehoshua said to him: “No.” He said to him: “But it was cited in your name that it is optional.” He said to him: “Yehoshua, stand up, and they will testify before you.” R. Yehoshua stood up and said: “If I was alive, and he (the witness) was dead, a living person can contradict the deceased. But since I am alive and he is alive, how can a living person contradict another living person?” R. Gamliel sat and taught, while R. Yehoshua stood, until everyone began to complain. They told Chuzpit, the speaker, to stop, and he stopped.

They said: “How much longer will he trouble him? Last year, he troubled him about Rosh Ha-shana. He troubled him regarding R. Tzadok’s *bekhorot* question. Now he also troubles him. Let us remove him [from his position]. Who will replace him? Should we appoint R. Yehoshua? He is one of the involved parties. Should we appoint R. Akiva? Perhaps R. Gamliel will punish him since he lacks ancestral merit [for protection]. Rather, let us appoint R. Elazar ben Azarya because he is a sage, he is wealthy, and he is a tenth generation descendant of Ezra. He is wise and will be able to answer questions. He is wealthy and will be able to attend to the Caesar if necessary. He is a tenth generation descendant of Ezra and has ancestral merit that will save him from punishment.”

They said to him: “Would you like to become head of the academy?” He said to them: “I will go consult with my wife.” He went and consulted with his wife. She said to him: “Maybe they will fire you.” He said to her: “A man should use an expensive cup for one day even if it breaks the next day.” She said to him: “You lack white hair.” He was eighteen years old on that day. A miracle occurred to him and eighteen rows of his hair turned white. That is what R. Elazar ben Azarya meant when he said: “I am like someone who is seventy,” and he did not simply say seventy.

It was taught: On that day, they removed the guard to the study hall and gave all students license to enter, for R. Gamliel used to say that any student whose inner character does not match his external appearance cannot enter the study hall. That day, many benches were added to the study hall. R. Yochanan said: “Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the rabbis argue about how many. One said four hundred benches and the other said seven hundred benches.” R. Gamliel was depressed. He said: “Perhaps, God forbid, I have held back Torah from Israel.” He was shown in a dream white containers full of ashes. But it is not so. This was only shown to R. Gamliel to placate him. It was taught: They formulated *Eduyot* on that day, and there was no law which had been in doubt that was not resolved. Also R. Gamliel did not absent himself from the study hall for a single moment….

R. Gamliel said: “Since this is so, I will go appease R. Yehoshua.” When he arrived at his house, he saw that the walls were black. He said to him: “From the walls of the house, I see that you are a smith.” He said to him: “Woe to the generation that you are its leader, because you do not know the struggles of scholars to make a living and support themselves.” He said to him: “I hurt you. Forgive me.” He did not pay attention to him. “Do it for the honor of my father.” He was appeased.

They said: “Who will go and inform the rabbis?” A cleaner said: “I will go.” R. Yehoshua sent a message to the study hall saying: “The one who wore the robe should wear the robe. Will the one who did not wear the robe say to the one who wore the robe: ‘Remove you robe and I will wear it’?” R. Akiva said to the rabbis: “Lock the gate so that R. Gamliel’s servants will not enter and bother the rabbis.” R. Yehoshua said: “I had better go and take care of it myself.” He went and knocked on the door. He said to them: “The sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler, should sprinkle. Should the one who is not a sprinkler, nor the son of a sprinkler, say to the sprinkler, the son of a sprinkler: ‘Your water is cave water, and your ashes are oven ashes’?” R. Akiva said to him: “You are appeased. We only did this to protect your honor. Tomorrow, you and I will go to his door.”

They said: “How should we do it? Should we demote him [R. Elazar ben Azarya]? We learned that we raise an item to a higher level of sanctity but do not degrade it to a lower level. Should they rotate weeks? This will cause jealousy. Rather, R. Gamliel will preach for three weeks and R. Elazar ben Azarya for one.” That is what the master said: “Whose week was it? It was that of R. Elazar.” And the student was R. Shimon bar Yochai (*Berakhot* 27b).

Why does R. Gamliel refer to the scholars as shield bearers? Tosafot R. Yehuda Ha-chasid suggest that scholars protect the generation. Rashi thinks that R. Gamliel uses the imagery of weapons to convey the intellectual debates among the sages. According to the latter approach, it is interesting that he refers to shields, rather than weapons of attack, such as swords or spears. R. Kook explains that Talmudic scholars engage in defensive war more than in an all out assault to annihilate the opposition. Since both rabbinic positions reflect an aspect of the truth, scholars must primarily bolster and affirm their own positions. We endorse a more aggressive attack only when debating a pernicious philosophy. Recognizing the validity of multiple positions constitutes an important theme in R. Kook’s thought.

The sages do not want to appoint R. Yehoshua, since he was an involved party. Rashi explains that such a move would add to R. Gamliel’s anguish at being displaced. Not only was he fired, but the person he argued with took over the position. Maharsha says that appointing R. Yehoshua would encourage rumors that R. Yehoshua picked a fight in order to get R. Gamliel fired and open up the position for his own benefit. The complicated dynamics of quarrels about leadership and authority often mandate bringing in a third party, in order to make prevent an ongoing negative atmosphere.

R. Elazar ben Azarya first checks with his wife. A few commentators, wondering why he needed to do this, cite R. Yonatan Eibeshitz (*Ya’arot Devash*) who assumes that the new position would impact on R. Elazar’s availability for marital relations. Therefore, he had to confirm with his spouse. Of course, we need not limit spousal concerns to that one area of life. Someone’s husband taking on an important communal role will impact on a person’s life in a great myriad of ways, including time constraints and communal pressures. Naturally, R. Elazar did not want to give an affirmative answer without her approval.

The new head of the academy introduces an important educational shift and allows all to enter the study hall. We could view this as the classic educational debate between a more restricted and elitist view (R. Gamliel) and a more democratic and egalitarian outlook (R. Elazar). R. Kook adds an element that links this debate with another position of R. Gamliel. Early in this story, R. Gamliel strongly asserts his authority by refusing to allow R. Yehoshua to challenge what R. Gamliel considers the accepted halakha (Jewish law). A teacher or leader who is very critical of the quality of his students or followers is also often authoritative. On the other hand, a person with greater confidence in his charges will rule with a less iron hand. R. Gamliel’s authoritarianism and his elitist educational philosophy go together.

R. Gamliel shows his greatness in later parts of the story. A displaced leader could easily storm off in a huff and move to another town or start a rival academy. Yet R. Gamliel chooses to stay and engage in Talmudic discourse in the very study hall where he once held sway. Furthermore, he finds the wherewithal to go and ask R. Yehoshua for forgiveness. In place of ongoing resentment, he contributes towards eventual reconciliation.

The story includes a good deal of self-referential imagery. To assuage R. Gamliel’s guilt, the dream shows him containers full of ashes. In other words, their pretty outside is belied by an empty inside, precisely the type of student R. Gamliel excluded. Later, a cleaner takes a message to the study hall and it consists of a parable involving clothing. Presumably the choice of clothing matches the profession of the messenger.

Perhaps the cleverest literary flourish is the two different parables conveying the need to return the position to R. Gamliel. The first refers solely to the person who wore the cloak, whereas the second mentions the father of the sprinkler in addition to the sprinkler himself. Only the latter parable moves the sages to restore R. Gamliel. The sages’ response mirrors R. Yehoshua’s response to R. Gamliel; R. Yehoshua will forgive him only after he mentions his father’s house, not when he makes a personal request.

One other literary maneuver worthy of notice is that the Gemarawaits until the end of the story to identify the student who asked the question. Had we discovered his identity at the outset, we might fault R. Shimon bar Yochai for the ensuing conflict. The narrator only informs us of his name after the conflict has been resolved, thereby forestalling any anger towards R. Shimon.

To avoid jealous competition, the final arrangement is that R. Gamliel speaks three weeks out of four, and R. Elazar is at the podium for the remaining week. Indeed, the history of *yeshivot* indicates that two leaders equally sharing authority frequently does not work. Their personalities or ideologies may clash, and even if they get along, devoted followers of each leader may start to contest the direction of the *yeshiva*. This happened in Volozhin and in many other learning institutions. Realizing this danger, the sages created a hierarchy which places R. Gamliel clearly in charge, but still preserves the dignity of R. Elazar.