YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic *Aggadot***

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**Shiur *#*20: The Story of the Death of R. Eliezer – part I**

**Introduction**

There are two main Talmudic sources for the story of the death of R. Eliezer ben Hurcanus: the Bavli, in *Massekhet Sanhedrin*, at the end of the seventh chapter (68a), and the Yerushalmi in *Massekhet Shabbat* (chapter 2, halakha 7; 5b). Although the narrative is similar in both accounts, there are also many differences between them. In this shiur and the next, we will address each of the stories, and especially their literary molding. We will note the differences between them and try to understand the broader context of the *sugyot* and the chapters within which they appear.

We shall begin with the story as it appears in the Yerushalmi. Our discussion will be largely based on the thorough analysis of Yona Frankel.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **The story in the Yerushalmi**

1.

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer lay dying on a Friday afternoon, as the end of the day grew close, and his son Hurcanus went in to remove his tefillin. He said to him, “My son, you have set aside the lighting of the [Shabbat] lamp, which is prohibited [once Shabbat has begun] under the category of shevut, and for which one is punishable by *karet*, for the sake of removing [my] tefillin, which is a violation of lesser severity [if performed once Shabbat has begun].” He went out, and cried out, saying, “Woe is me, for my father’s mind has become befuddled.” To which [R. Eliezer] responded, “It is your mind that has become befuddled; my mind is not befuddled.”

2.

When his disciples saw that he had responded with wisdom [indicating that his mind was sound], they went in to him and began questioning him. He told them, concerning that which was ritually impure, that it was impure, and concerning that which was ritually pure, that it was pure. With his last utterance of [the word] “pure”, his soul left him. They said, “It is [hereby] manifest that our Rabbi was pure.” Rabbi Mana declared, “Is it then only now that it is known?”

3.

Rabbi Yehoshua went in and removed his tefillin. And he embraced him and kissed him and wept, and said, “My teacher, my teacher, the vow is revoked; my teacher, chariot of Israel and its horsemen.”

1. **The three sections of the story**

The story consists of three parts, each distinctly demarcated both in terms of the characters that interact with R. Eliezer (first his son, Hurcanus, then the disciples, and finally R. Yehoshua), and by means of the repeated formula “… went in” that introduces each interaction, the function of which will be discussed below.

In the first section, the opening sentence introduces us to the main character (R. Eliezer), his situation (about to die), and the time (late Friday afternoon). Attention should be paid already at this stage to the fact that the narrator creates two axes of time that proceed in parallel – the time relative to the week, which is moving toward the end of the weekdays and the beginning of Shabbat, and the time relative to R. Eliezer’s life, which is likewise nearing its end, although there seems to be no indication of when exactly this will happen.[[2]](#footnote-2) What follows is a brief encounter between R. Eliezer and Hurcanus, his son. Hurcanus enters in order to remove his father’s tefillin, and R. Eliezer reproaches him. The son believes that his father has lost his mind, since the statement that his father makes – peppered with halakhic terms taken from the halakhic context of the *sugyot* surrounding the story- is not clear to him. What his father is in fact telling him is that at this critical hour – on the eve of Shabbat (Friday afternoon), as the day is drawing to a close[[3]](#footnote-3) – one has to set very clear priorities. First one takes care of urgent preparations (such as lighting the lamp), which, if left for later, would entail either the prohibition of *shevut* (if the candles are lit in the questionable period of dark or not-yet-dark) or, even worse, violation of the biblical prohibition (if the activity is performed when it is completely dark), which is punishable by *karet*. The removal of *tefillin* is less urgent, since it involves no danger of violating a prohibition punishable by *karet*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

An interesting question arises even at this early stage: why does R. Eliezer’s son come to remove his father’s *tefillin*? Is it because Shabbat is soon approaching, and *tefillin* are not worn on Shabbat? Or is it because his father’s death is approaching, and this, too, requires that the *tefillin* be removed? There seems to be deliberate ambiguity with regard to this question; as noted, from the outset there are two time frames: the life of R. Eliezer, and the approach of Shabbat. The ambiguous motive of the son is another expression of this overlap of timeframes. It provides us with a glimpse of what will happen later on when, with the transition to Shabbat (which is “a taste of the World to Come”), R. Eliezer, too, moves to the next world.

In the second section, the disciples enter and ask R. Eliezer a number of halakhic questions. He tells them, “concerning that which was ritually impure, that it was impure, and concerning that which was ritually pure, that it was pure” – a formulation which is also not entirely clear at first glance. In any event, his final response is “pure” – and then his soul leaves him. The disciples deduce from this that “It is [hereby] manifest that our Rabbi was pure” – yet another statement that requires some clarification.

In the third section, R. Yehoshua removes R. Eliezer’s tefillin, embraces and kisses him, and declares that the vow has been revoked. This vow, which is not mentioned previously in the story, is, of course, the excommunication which had been imposed on R. Eliezer in the wake of the famous dispute over the “oven of Achnai/Chakhinai”, which appears (in its Yerushalmi version) in Massekhet Mo’ed Katan (3:1, 81c).

1. **R. Eliezer’s excommunication and seclusion**

The story of the “oven of Achnai” is very well known, and we shall not elaborate here.[[5]](#footnote-5) We shall mention only one point, and that is that at the end of the story in the Yerushalmi we find a part that does not appear in the parallel account in the Bavli, in Bava Metzia, and is therefore less well-known:

“Once he passed through the marketplace and saw a woman cleaning her house, and she threw out [the garbage] and it fell on his head. He said, It seems that this day my colleagues will reconcile with me, as it is written, “He lifts the needy from the ash-heap (*Tehillim* 113:7).”

This ending to the story in the Yerushalmi expresses the lowly position and humiliation suffered by R. Eliezer as a result of the excommunication, symbolized by the garbage falling on his head. Perhaps the description also conveys his state of anonymity (not to say invisibility) in the wake of the excommunication; the woman does not realize that an important Sage is walking by, and is not careful to throw her garbage in a different direction.

The response of the refuse-covered R. Eliezer is poignant, conveying the great loneliness that he experiences as a result of his excommunication and his great longing to be reconciled with his colleagues. His loneliness seems to find expression in the molding of the three sections of the story of his death as well. As noted, each section starts with someone “entering.” First it is Hurcanus, his son; then his disciples, when they see that he has given a sensible response (the suspicion of his having lost his mind being yet another manifestation of his loneliness); and finally R. Yehoshua. This repeated image of someone “entering” makes us increasingly aware of how alone he has been until now. In addition, in the first section of the story, describing his exchange with his son, there is no indication (at least on the literal level of the text) that his son is generally at his side.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a situation such as this, where the father is on his deathbed, we might expect to find the son close by, offering food and drink, wiping his brow, and generally taking care of his needs. Instead, the son’s entry is described in purely practical, functional terms: he wants to remove his father’s *tefillin*, owing to some formal halakhic concern. There is no indication of any human contact. In fact, the father’s response and the son’s quick departure, bemoaning his father’s loss of his wits, emphasize the communication gap between them.

Perhaps we might add that behind R. Eliezer’s halakhic rebuke to his son lies a more covert message. His son is already removing his *tefillin*, as though officially announcing his death, while R. Eliezer is in fact still alive. What interests him is “lighting the lamp” – the flame symbolizing the soul and life itself.[[7]](#footnote-7) Removing the *tefillin* during the precious last moments when it is still possible to light the lamp might prevent it from being lit, leaving him in the dark, which will amplify his loneliness. The son fails to understand what his father is saying, both on the halakhic level (where he believes that his father’s statement is mixed-up and testifies to befuddlement), and on the emotional level (where he remains unaware of his father’s inner desire).

Perhaps the mention of the formal vow that caused the excommunication and the loneliness comes only at the end of the story in order to give less emphasis to the formal significance of the vow, and to focus more on the personal aspect of the loneliness and pain that it causes (the same aspect that seems to be emphasized at the end of the story of the “oven of Akhnai” in the Yerushalmi in Mo’ed Katan, as noted above). However, we shall return to this issue later on; first, we will turn our attention to another significant element in the molding of the story.

1. **The molding of time**

The most significant element in the literary molding of the story in the Yerushalmi would seem to be the dimension of time, as Frankel points out. Before addressing this dimension, let us dwell for a moment on the middle scene: the encounter with the disciples. R. Yehoshua’s declaration at the end of the story makes us aware of the context of the excommunication, and against this background we are in a better position to understand the mindset of the disciples. They seek to have the excommunication revoked, and they must bring this about before it is too late. It must happen before R. Eliezer dies (since if someone dies in excommunication his casket is stoned),[[8]](#footnote-8) and it must happen before Shabbat (since on Shabbat there is no annulment of vows).[[9]](#footnote-9) In order to revoke his excommunication, it is necessary (at least, according to their understanding) for R. Eliezer to recant on at least some of his points of dispute with the Sages. It is especially important for him to do so in matters of ritual purity and impurity, which is the sphere within which they disagreed over the oven, leading to the excommunication. They therefore pose questions in this sphere of halakha, and it seems that he is willing to accede to the opinion of the Sages, as evidenced by the fact that he answers “concerning that which was impure (i.e., that which is ruled impure by the Sages), that it was impure, and concerning that which was ritually pure, that it was pure.”

Now we have a better understanding of the molding of time in the story. We have already noted the two parallel axes of time created at the outset. As Frankel notes, the atmosphere of “just before Shabbat” is familiar to every Jewish home: these are perhaps the busiest and most frenzied moments of the week, crammed with a number of activities that can be performed only at that time, and not earlier or later (such as, for example, transferring hot food from the fire to the hot plate that will keep them warm).

The location of the story of R. Eliezer’s death within the timeframe of the moments just prior to Shabbat serves to project the stressful atmosphere of those moments onto the last moments of R. Eliezer’s life. Just as in every household there is a “race for time” leading up to Shabbat, so R. Eliezer’s disciples are in a race for time. In the short interval before their teacher passes away, they have a rare window of opportunity in which he is still conscious and still in control of his mental faculties. He is also, apparently, sufficiently reconciled that he is able to accede to the opinion of the Sages in matters of halakhic dispute – to perhaps bring about an annulment of the ban. The tension is very much like the tension leading up to Shabbat; whatever is not achieved right now will be impossible afterward. Thus, the atmosphere of the situation being described is influenced by the general context of the *sugya*, which deals with final preparations for Shabbat, and also by the mention of Shabbat approaching – both at the outset and in the exchange between R. Eliezer and his son. It is the disciples who undertake the race to revoke the excommunication in time.

There is a twist to the story – creating even greater tension – when suddenly, after several questions, R. Eliezer’s soul leaves him. Now it seems that the opportunity to lift the ban has been lost. All of R. Eliezer’s “correct” answers to the questions he was asked are now of no use. Even the final word he utters in this world – “pure” – produces a response on the part of the disciples whose meaning is unclear: “It is (hereby) manifest that our teacher is pure.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Breaking through time**

The third section of the story brings another surprise – this time, in the opposite direction. There is a wondrous moment in which time stands still. In contrast with the inexorable ticking of the clock in the first two sections, the dimension of time is now transcended and overcome. Frankel argues that R. Yehoshua treats R. Eliezer as though he was still alive, since a corpse cannot be touched on Shabbat, nor can a ban be lifted on Shabbat. R. Yehoshua defines this moment on R. Eliezer’s lifeline as one that is a sort of “twilight”: it still includes something of the day that has gone by, and has not passed altogether into the next day. Likewise, R. Eliezer still has some vitality; he has not quite passed over into the world of the dead. R. Yehoshua’s paraphrase of the words that Elisha utters when his teacher, Eliyahu, arises to the heavens – “My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen” (*Melakhim* 2 13:14), likewise expresses the idea that R. Eliezer is not actually dead – just as Eliyahu never died – even though he has passed into the World of Truth. Perhaps this idea is already expressed in the words of the disciples, when they say, “It is [hereby] manifest that our Rabbi is pure” – meaning, the impurity of death has no hold on his body. In any event, the practical ramification of this situation is that it is not yet too late to annul the ban, and so R. Yehoshua proceeds to announce, “The vow is annulled.” Although it had seemed that the moment had been lost, R. Yehoshua solves this problem by “stopping time”, as it were – whether in the physical sense or in the halakhic sense. Frankel describes it thus:

“Indeed, it would appear that the third part of the story creates a sort of escape from real time, from what comes after “dying on the eve of Shabbat as the day draws to a close.” R. Yehoshua’s actions ignore the passage of time, as it were… The psychological foundation of this escape into surreal time is R. Yehoshua’s longing for his old friend, R. Eliezer. The kisses and the weeping… express the emotional outpouring which, in the literary sense, draw time along with it.”

The molding of time serves the narrator as a means of creating the atmosphere of the story and expressing the urgency of annulling the ban before R. Eliezer dies. This same literary device – the ability to manipulate the molding of time in R. Eliezer’s life in the story – and its placement within the chronological mold of a week that is drawing to a close, also helps the narrator to achieve the seemingly impossible. It allows for the annulment of the ban even after (or at least simultaneously with) the departure of R. Eliezer’s soul.

1. **The complex ending of the story**

The story seemingly has a happy ending. Despite the initial tension and uncertainty, the race is worthwhile, and the ban is lifted. Indeed, in terms of R. Eliezer’s excommunication, the end of the story should be viewed as a success. And this success has repercussions for all future generations. In terms of the Oral Law and its development, R. Eliezer – who would have remained “outside” of this arena had he died while still under the ban – is an “insider”, and his teachings are an integral part of the Oral Law.

However, upon deeper reflection, the situation turns out to be more complex. Here we come back to the same point we addressed at the outset: the sensitivity of the descriptions in the Yerushalmi to R. Eliezer’s personal isolation. As noted, part of the molding of the story relates to this isolation and the severance between R. Eliezer and his colleagues, who do not understand his innermost thinking. The perspective of “R. Eliezer, the man” is an additional perspective that exists in the story, along with the eternal persona of “the Tanna, R. Eliezer.” The Tanna, R.Eliezer’s excommunication is revoked and his story ends on a positive note. From the point of view of R. Eliezer, the man, the story remains a tragedy. The embrace, kisses and tears of R. Yehoshua come too late. R. Eliezer, who longed and pined for some warmth and friendship from his colleges, can no longer appreciate them or benefit from them.

This point finds expression in the molding of the third section of the story. When R. Yehoshua enters, we read that it is he who removes R. Eliezer’s *tefillin*. If the point of the third section is to show how, ultimately, the ban is lifted, and R. Eliezer is restored to his status among the Sages, then what is the importance of this detail? Here we come back to the symbolic image discussed above, in relation to the first section. Hurcanus, the son, wishes to remove his father’s *tefillin*, while R. Eliezer rebukes him, maintaining that right now the lighting of the Shabbat lamp takes preference. We explained that, beyond the halakhic and practical significance of these actions, they would appear to have symbolic significance, too: R. Eliezer is grasping onto life. He wishes not to have his tefillin removed, which would symbolize his death, but rather to have the lamp lit, symbolizing hope and the illuminating of the darkness of his loneliness. In the third section, R. Yehoshua repeats Hurcanus’s actions: this time, he succeeds in removing the *tefillin*; there is no longer a voice calling for the lamp to be lit. The story returns to its beginning, and R. Eliezer is silent. The *tefillin* have been removed, but the lamp is not lit; it has been extinguished. This repeating of the actions of the son in the first section, without any mention of lighting the lamp, symbolizes – from R. Eliezer’s personal point of view – the tragedy. He dies in his isolation, in the dark.

The story in the Yerushalmi is, thus, a complex one. On one hand, it is a story of success – the success of the persona of R. Eliezer, achieving an eternal place among the Sages of the Oral Law. On the other hand, this success story is interwoven with the personal tragedy of R. Eliezer the man. R. Eliezer, according to the Yerushalmi in Mo’ed Katan, longed so deeply for renewed contact with and closeness to his fellow Sages. He dies without achieving this, as the price for the fierce controversy over the “oven of Akhnai.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Y. Frankel, *Sippur ha-Aggada – Achdut shel Tochen ve-Tzura*, Tel Aviv, 5761, pp. 156-163. We will not adhere strictly to Frankel’s analysis and his interpretation of the story; our own interpretation ultimately takes a different direction. Another article that also inspired our discussion (especially of the story as recorded in the Bavli, and the differences between the two accounts, which we will address in the next *shiur*), is that of A. Goshen-Gottstein, “Chakham Boded al Eres Devai: Sippur Mitat Rabbi Eliezer (*Sanhderin* 68a) – Nituach Ideologi”, in: *Mechkarim be-Talmud u-va-Midrash; Sefer Zikaron le-Tirtza Lipschitz* (A. Edrei et al. [eds.]), Jerusalem, 5765, pp. 79-112.

These two authors address the accounts independently of their contexts. After discussing the molding of the stories, our aim will be to examine the broader context within which they are situated. This, as noted at the outset of this series, is one of our primary aims; for this reason we address some *aggadot* that already have an extensive body of literature written about them, with which we are generally in agreement. The additional dimension that we hope to offer is an examination of the relationship with the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frankel, p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This time is still defined as day, and the halakha permits every sort of labor to be performed. The next block of time is referred to as “*bein ha-shemashot*” (twilight), where it is not clear whether the sky is darkening or not; at this time mainly biblically-ordained Shabbat prohibitions are forbidden. The third stage is when it is definitely dark, and at this point all Shabbat restrictions must be observed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For detailed explanation of the terms, see Frankel, pp. 157-159. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The interested reader is referred to an article by Jeffrey Rubinstein, who compares the version of a story in Bava Metzia in the Bavli to the parallel version that appears in the Yerushalmi in Mo’ed Katan. The article appears in English as the second chapter of his book *Talmudic Stories:* *Narrative Art, Composition and Culture*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We do not mean here to make any assessment of the factual, historical way in which Hurcanus, the son, actually treated his father, R. Eliezer, on his deathbed. Our focus is on the way in which the narrator conveys the story and the impression that he tries to create, for the purposes of the general message, as we shall see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This image is common throughout religious literature, based on the verse, “The soul of man is the candle of the Lord” (*Mishlei* 20:27). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, *Massekhet Semachot*, chapter 5, halakha 13ד. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mishna Shabbat 24:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Indeed, this seemingly unintelligible answer prompts R. Mana’s question. See further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)