YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur21: The Story of the Death R. Eliezer – part II**

1. **Introduction**

In the [previous shiur](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-20-story-death-r-eliezer-%E2%80%93-part-i), we discussed the story of the death of R. Eliezer as it appears in the Yerushalmi. Based on the analysis by Yona Frankel, we noted that a central element in the literary molding of the story was the dimension of time. Time superimposes the lifeline of R. Eliezer, which is drawing to its close; the week likewise draws to a close in the story as Shabbat approaches. This connection dramatizes the tension that grips R. Eliezer’s disciples, who want to annul his excommunication before it is too late. It also casts a wondrous light on the moment when R. Yehoshua “stops time,” and annuls the ban.

Another point we noted in the molding of the story was the disparity between the story of the eternal figure of R. Eliezer, the Sage – a story with a happy ending, in the form of the annulment of his excommunication – and the story of R. Eliezer, the man, which ends tragically; the terrible loneliness that characterized his later years accompanies R. Eliezer, the man, to the very end.

1. **The story in the Bavli**

The parallel account in the Bavli is found at the end of the seventh chapter of *Massekhet Sanhedrin* (68a):

1. When R. Eliezer fell ill, R. Akiva and his companions went in to visit him.
2. He was seated in his canopied bed, while they sat in his hallway.
3. That day was the eve of Shabbat, and Hurcanus, his son, went in to remove his *tefillin*.
4. [R. Eliezer] rebuked him, and he emerged crestfallen.
5. He said to the companions, ‘It seems to me that my father’s mind is befuddled.’
6. He said to them, ‘His mind and that of his mother is befuddled: how can one set aside a prohibition punishable by stoning, in favor of a prohibition of [mere] ‘*shevut’*?
7. When the Sages saw that his mind was clear, they entered and sat before him at a distance of four *amot*.
8. He said to them, ‘Why have you come?’
9. They replied, ‘To study Torah.’
10. He asked, ‘Why then did you not come before now?’
11. They replied, ‘We had no time.’
12. He said to them, ‘I will be surprised if these people die a natural death.’
13. R. Akiva said to him, ‘What will my death be?’
14. He told him, ‘Yours will be more harsh than theirs.’
15. He then placed his two arms over his heart
16. and said, ‘Woe to you, my two arms, which are like two Sifrei Torah that are rolled up.
17. I have studied much Torah, and I have taught much Torah.
18. I have studied much Torah – and yet I skimmed from my teachers less than a dog lapping from the sea.
19. I have taught much Torah – yet my disciples skimmed from me only as much as a paintbrush from its tube.
20. Moreover, I have studied three hundred laws on the subject of a deep bright spot (*baheret azza*), but no-one has ever asked me about them.
21. Moreover, I have studied three hundred laws (some say ‘three thousand’) concerning the planting of cucumbers, and no-one has ever asked me about them, except for Akiva ben Yosef.
22. Once he and I were walking together on the way
23. and he said to me, ‘Rabbi, teach me about the planting of cucumbers.’
24. I said one thing and the entire field was filled with cucumbers.
25. He said to me, ‘Rabbi, you have taught me about planting them, now teach me how to pluck them.’
26. I said one thing, and all [the cucumbers] gathered in one place.’
27. They then said to him, ‘What is the law concerning a ball, a shoemaker’s last, an amulet, a leather bag containing pearls, and a small weight?’
28. He said to them, ‘They are impure, and if impure they are restored to purity just as they are.’
29. [Then they asked,] ‘What of a shoe that is upon the last?’
30. He answered, ‘It is pure.’
31. And his soul left him with purity [or, ‘with the word – pure’].
32. R. Yehoshua stood up and announced, ‘The vow is annulled; the vow is annulled!’
33. At the conclusion of Shabbat, R. Akiva met him [i.e., the funeral bier of R. Eliezer] on its way from Caesaria to Lod.
34. He beat his flesh until the blood flowed down upon the ground.
35. R. Akiva then commenced his funeral address as [the mourners] stood in a line, saying: My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” (Melakhim II 13:14). I have many coins, but I have no money-changer to accept them.”
36. **Differences between the Bavli and the Yerushalmi**

The skeleton of the story here is similar to the version in the Yerushalmi, but the differences in many details as well as in the molding of the story are readily apparent. The scope of our discussion does not allow for attention to every detail of the Bavli’s story, which is longer and more complex than the parallel version. We will focus on the main differences, with an emphasis on an important literary device: the borrowing of expressions and motifs from other rabbinical sources, and the way in which they enrich the content and messages of the story, as we shall see.

Let us begin by pointing out the main differences between the two versions. The timeframe and the parallel to the approach of Shabbat play a far less central role here than they do in the Yerushalmi; in fact, they are mentioned as an aside, with only marginal significance to the overall narrative. On the other hand, as Alon Goshen-Gottstein demonstrates at length, two important points stand out prominently in the account in the Bavli: the central status of R. Akiva, of whom no mention is made in the Yerushalmi, and the more detailed attention to R. Eliezer’s teachings.[[1]](#footnote-1) In comparison to the Yerushalmi, which is molded in such a way as to illuminate the personal perspective of R. Eliezer, the man, and his loneliness, the story in the Bavli focuses more on R. Eliezer, the Tanna, and the ramifications of his death, the ban, and its annulment on his teachings. Before exploring the significance of these differences, let us address a few specific points pertaining to the unique linguistic molding of the story in the Bavli.

1. **“The Sages went in to him”**

Our story begins with the words, “When R. Eliezer fell ill… went in to visit him.” A variation of this introduction, which is found in most of the manuscripts and seems to be a more accurate version, reads, “The Sages went in to him.” This formula appears many times in rabbinical narratives concerning R. Eliezer,[[2]](#footnote-2) and therefore broadcasts a sense of “business as usual,” lulling the reader and intensifying the jolt that comes with the next sentence: “He was seated in his canopied bed, while they sat in his hallway” (line 2), indicating the physical distance that the Sages maintain. This is emphasized further on, when they actually enter his room: “When the Sages saw that his mind was clear, they entered and sat before him at a distance of four *amot*.” (line 7) There is a clear emphasis on the Sages’ punctilious observance of the terms of the ban.

1. **“He rebuked him, and [Hurcanus] emerged crestfallen”**

R. Eliezer’s response to his son’s attempts to remove his *tefillin* is formulated differently here: “He rebuked him, and he emerged crestfallen.” This wording appears to be meant to recall two other places where the same formula appears.

a. One source is *Massekhet Shabbat* 31a, describing the response of Shammai the Elder to a non-Jew who wanted to convert and came to him, asking to be taught the Written Law alone (without the Oral Law). The precise wording in *Massekhet Shabbat* is, “He rebuked him and sent him out crestfallen.” The connection created through the use of this expression is interesting, since R. Eliezer is known to be a “*Shamoti*” (*Yerushalmi, Shevi’it*, end of chapter 1, and elsewhere) – meaning, a follower of the tradition of Shammai, such that Shammai might be regarded as his “spiritual father.” Shammai’s harsh response to the potential proselyte’s unwillingness to study the Oral Law is replicated in R. Eliezer’s anger toward his son, who makes no distinction between an act prohibited and punishable by stoning, and a prohibition of mere “*shevut*” – a distinction that is not explicit in the Written Law, and arises from the Oral Law. However, the connection to our story goes deeper than this. Later on we see that what disturbs R. Eliezer above all is his inability to pass on the tradition of the Oral Law that he received from his teachers to the next generation. Therefore, his expression of frustration at the beginning of the story, recalling the outrage of his own “teacher,” Shammai, may hint to a major theme that becomes manifest later on.

b. The other story hinted to by the expression is found in a midrash halakha in the Sifri on *Devarim* (*piska* 305):

“At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Angel of Death: ‘Go and bring me the soul of Moshe.’ He went and stood before him, and said, ‘Moshe, give me your soul.’ He said to him, ‘In the place where I sit, you have no right to stand – and yet you say to me, Give me your soul?!’ He rebuked him and he emerged crestfallen.”

This, too, is an interesting connection. The midrash describes Moshe’s final moments, when his time has come to die – like R. Eliezer. His statement, “In the place where I sit, you have no right to stand” likewise recalls the distance that the Sages maintain from R. Eliezer, even though the statement here is meant in a different way. The Angel of Death comes to take Moshe’s life and Moshe rebukes him – just as R. Eliezer rebukes his son who comes to remove his tefillin in a move that might be perceived as symbolically announcing his imminent death. The allusion to this source creates a parallel between R. Eliezer and Moshe, and its significance would seem to be a boosting of R. Eliezer’s prestige as a transmitter of Torah. This message is further reinforced by R. Eliezer himself later on in the story.

1. **“How can one set aside a prohibition punishable by stoning, for the sake of [an act] forbidden as ‘*shevut’*?**

R. Eliezer’s explanation for his anger towards his son likewise hints to another story – this time, a story about R. Eliezer himself, found in *Massekhet Beitza* 15b:

It once happened that R. Eliezer sat and taught the laws of the festival for the entire day [of the festival]. A first group left, and he said, “These are ‘cask’ people.” A second group left… A fifth group left and he said, “These are ‘beaker’ people.” A sixth group began to leave, and he said, “These are cursed people.” He cast his eyes upon his disciples and their faces began to change. He said to them, “My sons, it is not of you that I said this, but of those who have gone out, who put aside eternal life and occupy themselves with ephemeral life….”

The comparison to the story in *Beitza* serves to highlight R. Eliezer’s insistence on a clear distinction between different levels of priority, and it explains the Sages’ instant recognition of his presence of mind in the next line: “When they saw that his mind was clear….” This was the same R. Eliezer that they knew.

1. **“You have taught me how to plant them; teach me how to pluck them”**

The middle part of the story describes how R. Akiva was walking with R. Eliezer, who showed him how, with a mere utterance, he “planted” cucumbers. Thereafter R. Akiva asked how this process could be reversed: “You have taught me how to plant them, now teach me how to pluck them.” This request recalls the well-known story about Moshe Rabbenu and Rabbi Akiva (*Menachot* 29b):

When Moshe ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in attaching crowns to the letters. He said to Him, ‘Master of the universe, for whom do You do this?’ He told him, ‘There will be a man, at the end of many generations, by the name of Akiva ben Yosef, and he will expound on each and every such point mounds upon mounds of laws.’ He said to Him, ‘Master of the universe, show him to me.’ He said, ‘Turn around.’ [Moshe] went and sat eight rows back [among R. Akiva’s disciples]. Unable to understand their arguments, he grew despondent, but when they reached a certain subject the disciples said to [R. Akiva], ‘Rabbi, from where do you know this?’ and he replied, ‘It is a law given to Moshe at Sinai,’ and so [Moshe] was reassured. He said: ‘Master of the universe, You have such a man – and yet you give the Torah through me?!’ He replied, ‘Be silent; such is My decree.’ He said, ‘Master of the universe, You have shown me his Torah; now show me his reward.’ He said to him, ‘Turn around.’ He turned, and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market stalls…”

In this *midrash*, Moshe requests of God that after showing him R. Akiva’s greatness in Torah, He also show him the reward that R. Akiva receives. But the reward turns out to be a “plucking” – a death in sanctification of God’s Name. Therefore, on both the thematic and the linguistic ("You have taught/shown me… now teach/show me…") planes the *midrash* is connected to R. Akiva’s request of R. Eliezer in our story: “You have shown me how they are planted; now show me how they are plucked.” The parallel to the story in *Menachot* serves once again to connect R. Eliezer to Moshe, and also reinforces the connection to R. Akiva, who appears only in the Bavli’s version of our story. Thus, continuity is formed, running from Moshe, transmitter of the Torah (and attention should be paid to the fact that the story in *Menachot* is about Moshe’s transmission of the Torah), via R. Eliezer, to R. Akiva. R. Akiva is a central figure in the transmission of the Oral Law and appears in our story as imbibing the teachings of R. Eliezer.

The comparison to Moshe as transmitter of the Torah recalls the image that R. Eliezer invokes in his monologue, in the middle part of the story: “My two arms which are like two Sifrei Torah that are rolled up.” The arms recall the Torah given by Moshe, but for R. Eliezer the scrolls are “rolled up” and closed, because his Torah has no continuation; it will remain inside him and will not be passed on.

The lack of continuity is also emphasized in what R. Eliezer says next: “I have studied much Torah, I have taught much Torah. I have studied much Torah – and yet I skimmed from [the knowledge of] my teachers less than a dog lapping from the sea. I have taught much Torah – yet my disciples skimmed from me only as much as a paintbrush from its tube.” He compares what he has studied from his teachers as a dog lapping at the water in the sea: the dog may be thirsty and lap with great enthusiasm, but he drinks only the tiniest drop of that vast expanse. This is how R. Eliezer sees himself in relation to his teachers. In describing his disciples, R. Eliezer uses a different image. Perhaps what he means is that they have learned little from him – like a paintbrush that is dipped for just a moment and takes little along with it. However, it is possible that the image should be interpreted in the same sense in which it is used by Chazal in other contexts – as a euphemism for sexual relations. This interpretation has two implications: firstly, R. Eliezer views the relationship between a teacher and the students to whom he transmits Torah as a relationship of great intimacy. Secondly, R. Eliezer depicts his own role in learning from his teachers as an act of initiative and taking (“lapping”); in depicting his interaction with his students, he compares himself to a "tube" that "gives" paint to a “paintbrush” – once again showing initiative and “giving” to them. This expresses his strong desire to influence them, to give and transmit the Torah that he has received – a desire that, to his great frustration, will not be realized.

1. **R. Eliezer’s Torah and his relations with R. Akiva**

This brings us back to the points we mentioned above as being central to the version of the story that appears in the *Bavli*. The narrative is focused intensively on R. Eliezer’s Torah and the question of its continuation. At the center of the story, we find R. Eliezer’s monologue about his Torah – which, to his view, has been lost and has not been passed on properly to future generations, *inter alia* as a result of his excommunication. This monologue displaces the question-and-answer session that appears prior to his death, shifting it to a later section of the story as opposed to the Yerushalmi. Moreover, the questions and answers as recorded in the *Bavli* are different from the version in the Yerushalmi, and appear to have a different aim, even though in both instances the dialogue ends with the departure of R. Eliezer’s soul with the word “pure.”

In the [previous shiur](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-20-story-death-r-eliezer-%E2%80%93-part-i) we saw that the aim of the disciples’ questioning in the Yerushalmi was apparently to bring about an annulment of the excommunication in the wake of R. Eliezer’s acceding, at the last moment, to the position of the Sages. In the *Bavli*, we must interpret the situation differently, since with regard to at least some of the questions that are raised – and which are known to us from other sources – R. Eliezer stands by his dissenting opinion.[[3]](#footnote-3) The questions are posed in light of R. Eliezer’s lament for his Torah which will be lost, and therefore it seems that the Sages want to use this last opportunity to learn what they can from him.[[4]](#footnote-4) This softens somewhat the tragedy of the lack of continuity for his teachings, which seems to be the focus of the story. This, according to the version in the *Bavli*, is the very heavy price that R. Eliezer pays in the wake of his excommunication. He expresses his great sorrow in strong terms in the middle part of the story, and the *Bavli* appears to offer an attempt to correct and repair this tragedy – at least retroactively, and to a minor degree. One symbolic manner of repair is, as noted, the desire of the Sages to learn at least a few laws from him before he dies. Another gesture of repair is the centrality of R. Akiva in the story. Goshen-Gottstein explains this centrality, and the close teacher-student relationship between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva, as an attempt to create the sense that there is at least some continuity for his Torah.[[5]](#footnote-5) This sense arises from the fact that, as we know, R. Akiva and his *beit midrash* play a most central role in the development of the Oral Law during the period of the Tannaim. It is the teachings of Rabbi Akiva, passed down and developed by his major disciples (Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda and others), which are organized later on by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi into the monumental work that will preserve the Oral Law for all later generations – the Mishna:

“A Mishna cited with no source comes from R. Meir; a *tosefta* cited with no source comes from R. Nechemia; a Sifra – from Rabbi Yehuda; Sifri – Rabbi Shimon, and they all follow R. Akiva” – Sanhedrin 86.

By means of the link between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva, the story restores at least some of R. Eliezer’s teachings to the normative stream of the Oral Law. As part of this endeavor, we find that at the end of the story in the Bavli the lament of Elisha over Eliyahu, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen,” is placed specifically in the mouth of R. Akiva, This expresses R. Akiva’s close relationship with R. Eliezer as his personal teacher – paralleling the relationship between the prophets.

1. **The context within the chapter in *Massekhet Sanhedrin***

The story of R. Eliezer’s death in the *Bavli* is placed at the end of the seventh chapter of Massekhet Sanhedrin. The chapter is devoted mainly to a list of “those who are stoned” – the various types of sins for which the punishment is death by stoning. There are a number of ways in which the story of R. Eliezer is connected to this general context:

1. At the beginning of the story, R. Eliezer is angry because “a prohibition punishable by stoning” is set aside in favor of a less serious prohibition. He tries to prevent his son, and perhaps the rest of the Sages, from transgressing the prohibition (which would be entailed in lighting the lamp after it is already Shabbat). This hints to another, deeper issue in the story: the annulment of the ban, which happens at the end, saves R. Eliezer himself from stoning, since that is the fate of someone who dies in a state of excommunication.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a certain sense, so long as R. Eliezer is excommunicated and is likely to die in that state, he will, for all practical purposes, join the group of “those who are stoned,” as listed in the chapter. The context therefore serves to emphasize the importance of annulling the ban.
2. The story is brought in the Gemara as a question arising from the last Mishna, which states that R. Akiva studied witchcraft or magic relating to cucumbers from R. Yehoshua – in contrast to the situation described in the story, where he is involved in this sphere together with R. Eliezer. The last category set forth explicitly in this chapter of those who are stoned consists of those involved in witchcraft. These witches and wizards, according to the stories and images surrounding them in the sugya, are “shady” characters on the margins of Jewish society. According to the view of R. Yochanan in the Gemara, they “deny the heavenly host” (Sanhedrin 67b). It seems that the narrator finds it very important to emphasize that R. Eliezer – both as someone who has been excommunicated, and as someone who is known to be capable of performing various “wonders” (as in the story of the “oven of Akhnai”) – does not belong to this category. This may be another reason for bringing the story in its entirety in this context: to emphasize the difference between R. Eliezer and those who are stoned, and especially wizards. Therefore, the story also mentions that among the other things that R. Akiva – who is solidly within the scholarly consensus – learns from R. Eliezer is how to perform such wonders with cucumbers. This, then, is another aspect of the point of the story in the Bavli: to retain R. Eliezer and his teachings within the Jewish social consensus and as an integral part of the development of the Oral Law.
3. **The ending**

The story ends with two important descriptions. We have already discussed the significance of R. Akiva’s lament, testifying to the close teacher-disciple relationship between R. Eliezer and himself, paralleling the relationship between Eliyahu and Elisha. The other description that appears in the final part of the story is of R. Yehoshua: “R. Yehoshua stood up and said: ‘The vow is annulled; the vow is annulled.’” Here, too, the formulation is different from that in the Yerushalmi (“He embraced him… and wept and said, My teacher, my teacher! The vow is annulled.”) The language in the Yerushalmi connects the story there to that of the “oven of Akhnai,” found in the Yerushalmi in Mo’ed Katan, where R. Akiva informs R. Eliezer of the commencement of the ban: “My teacher, my teacher – your colleagues have excommunicated you.” The description in the story in the *Bavli* likewise connects the annulment of the ban to where everything started – the story of the “oven of Akhnai,” which appears in the *Bavli* in *Bava Metzia*. However, here the connection is made not via R. Akiva’s notification of the implementation of the ban, but rather via a different element of the story. At the climax of the argument between R. Eliezer and the Sages, we find a dramatic expression of the Sages’ victory: “Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and said, It is not in the heavens!” The story in the Bavli recalls that moment by using the same language to record the annulment of the ban: “R. Yehoshua stood up and said: The vow is annulled!” R. Yehoshua, who had declared victory in the beit midrash over the teachings of R. Eliezer, following which they burned the items that he had declared ritually pure in front of him and then excommunicated him – is the same R. Yehoshua who now stands and declares the ban annulled. It seems that the connection that the Bavli makes in this regard is not incidental. As we have seen, the main emphasis of the story in the *Bavli* is the ban – especially as it pertains to the teachings of R. Eliezer. Therefore, it is appropriate that the same person who declares victory over the teachings of R. Eliezer – a victory that dealt a deathly blow to their continuation – announces, in similar format, the annulment. Thus, the story in the *Bavli* expresses – at its conclusion, too – the significance of the annulment: its impact extends not only to the death of R. Eliezer as a Sage (rather than as an individual in excommunication), but also to the renewed status of his teachings, which once again became part of the development of the Oral Law.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. “Chakham Boded al Eres Devai, Sippur Mittat Rabbi Eliezer (Sanhedrin 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. Some of the points we raise here are based on Goshen-Gottstein’s article, which also compares the two parallel accounts – with an emphasis on the Bavli. On some issues Goshen-Gottstein takes the discussion in a different direction; we shall offer a broader view of the context of the story, which neither Frankel nor Goshen-Gottstein provides. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, *Avoda Zara* 16b; *Vayikra Rabba* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The scope of our discussion does not allow elaboration on the specific questions and the sources where they appear. Goshen-Gottstein examines them at length, ibid., pp. 90-94. As one example, concerning the shoe that is upon the last, we find in *Massekhet Kelim*, chapter 26, Mishna 4, that R. Eliezer declares it pure while the Sages declare it impure. R. Eliezer stands by his position in our story. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Avot de-Rabbi Natan (version 1), chapter 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The reality is somewhat different, since a large portion of R. Akiva’s Torah comes from a different direction. R. Eliezer is a “plastered well that does not lose a single drop” (*Avot*, chapter 2, Mishna 8) – an expression that conveys, above all, the preservation of the halakhic tradition of his teachers. Rabbi Akiva, in contrast, derives new insights and laws from every letter in the Torah (as illustrated, for instance, in the *midrash* cited above, in which Moshe “attends” his lecture). In this respect he is less a continuation of R. Eliezer, and more similar to R. Elazar ben Arakh, who is “like a gushing spring” (Avot, ibid.). Nevertheless, our story indicates that at least in some respect and to some degree, R. Akiva does learn from R. Eliezer. See also Goshen-Gottstein’s discussion, p. 95 onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As we find, for example, in *Massekhet Semachot* (Avel Rabbati), chapter 5, halakha 13: “One who does in excommunication requires stoning. It is not like the case of Akhan, where a large pile of stones is placed over him; rather, an emissary of the Beit Din takes up a tone and places it upon his casket, thereby fulfilling the commandment of stoning.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)