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## Stories with a Twist [13]

### Rabbi Elazar and the Ugly Man (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 20a)



#### Background to Our Story

##### Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Simeon



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elazar\\_ben\\_Simeon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elazar_ben_Simeon)

Elazar b. Simeon (or Elazar ben Simeon or Rabbi Elazar son of R. Simeon) was a Jewish Tanna sage of the fifth generation, contemporary of Rabbi Judah haNasi.

He was the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and appears in many of the stories concerning his father. According to these stories, Elazar spent his youth with his father in a cave, studying Torah while hiding from the Roman persecutors who sought his father's life. After the death of Hadrian, when events took a somewhat more favorable turn for the Jews, father and son left the cave and returned to the busy world. Elazar, grown too zealous during his long seclusion, often cursed those who devoted their time to things secular, and his father found it necessary to interfere, appeasing them and mollifying him.

After Shimon's death Elazar entered the academy of the Patriarch Simeon ben Gamaliel II, and became the colleague of the patriarch's son, Judah HaNasi; but there was rivalry between the two. Nevertheless, after Elazar's death, Judah HaNasi devoted himself to caring for Elazar's wayward son Yosei.

There are various legendary stories concerning Elazar's unusual physical size.

Though wanted in his youth by the Roman government, later on Elazar worked on behalf of the Roman government as a security and public order commissioner. This made him very unpopular.

Later in life he regretted the part he had taken under the hated government, and is said to have imposed on himself the most painful penance. His wife even divorced him because the financial cost of caring for his ailments was draining her family.

wealth, though after this Elazar was able to support himself due to the timely arrival of sixty sailors bearing gifts for him.

Elazar and his wife seem to have reunited by the time of his death. As Elazar lay dying, worrying that resentment over his government work would lead the rabbis to deny him a proper burial, he enjoined his wife to preserve his remains under her roof rather than burying him immediately. He died at Akbara, and his wife did as instructed. Legend relates many miracles performed by the dead rabbi, one of which was that litigants plead their cases in the rabbi's house, and the verdict was pronounced from the mortuary chamber. After many years his former colleagues resolved to bury him, but a new difficulty arose. The inhabitants of Akbara, believing that the sage's remains miraculously protected them against incursions of wild beasts, refused permission to remove the body. Ultimately, however, in compliance with the request of the rabbis, people from the nearby town of Biryra carried it off by stealth, and it was deposited at Meron beside that of his father.

Due to his varied learning, his surviving colleagues cited the Scriptural verse "Who is it that comes out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant? and answered, "It is Elazar ben Simon, who united in himself all noble qualities, he having been well versed in Scripture and in traditional law, and having been a [liturgical] poet, a leader in prayers, and a preacher".

### Rabbis' Distinctive Attire



### Studying Torah in the Time of the Talmud

#### Cedars, Reeds, and Quills



#### Migdal Gedor

The location of Migdal Gedor is unclear. Some contend that it was a small settlement between Hamat Gader and Gader. According to this opinion, the river referred to in the Gemara was apparently the Yarmouk.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 20a

תנו רבנן: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז. מעשה שבא רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון ממגדל גדור מבית רבו, והיה רכוב על חמור ומטייל על שפת נה. ר. ושמח שמחה גדולה, והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד תורה הרבה, נזדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר אמר לו: שלום עליך, רבי. ולא התזיר לו. אמר לו: ריקה, כמה מכוער אותו האיש! שמא כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך? אמר לו: איני יודע, אלא לך ואמור לאומן שעשאני: כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית! כיון שידע בעצמו שחטא, ירד מן החמור ונשתטח לפניו, ואמר לו: נעניתי לך, מחול לי! אמר לו: איני מחול לך עד שתלך לאומן שעשאני ואמור לו: כמה מכוער כלי זה שעשית! היה מטייל אחריו עד שהגיע לעירו. יצאו בני עירו לקראתו, והיו אומרים לו: שלום עליך, רבי, רבי, מורי, מורי. אמר להם: למי אתם קורין: רבי, רבי? אמרו לו: לזה שמטייל אחריה. אמר להם: אם זה רבי, אל ירבו כמותו בישראל! אמרו לו: מפני מה? אמר להם: כך וכך עשה לי. אמרו לו: אף על פי כן, מחול לו, שאדם גדול בתורה הוא. אמר להם: בשבילכם הריני מחול לו, ובלבד שלא יהא רגיל לעשות כן. מיד נכנס רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון ודרש: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארז. ולפיכך זכה קנה ליטול הימנה קולמוס לכתוב בו ספר תורה, תפילין, ומזוזות.

An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?

The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made.

When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me.

The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made. He walked behind until they reached Rabbi Elazar's city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master.

The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi?

They [the people of Rabbi Elazar's city] said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you.

He [the man] said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people.

They [the people of Rabbi Elazar's city] asked him: For what reason do you say this?

He [the man] said to them: He did such and such to me.

They [the people of Rabbi Elazar's city] said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He [the man] said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this.

Immediately, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar. And therefore, due to its gentle qualities, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*.



### **Explaining the Story**

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

### **Comprehension Questions**

**?** Why did the ugly man greet Rabbi Elazar?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** How did the ugly man know Rabbi Elazar was a rabbi?

**?** Who is “the craftsman” the ugly man is referring to?

**?** Why do the people go out to greet Rabbi Elazar?

**?** What is the process of repentance described in the story?

### **Analysis Questions**

**?** What is your opinion about the quality of the “Torah” Rabbi Elazar studied?

**?** The people of Rabbi Elazar’s city said to the ugly man: “Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.” Why would they say so after learning what Rabbi Elazar did?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** After the incident, Rabbi Elazar enters (the Beit Midrash) immediately to teach: “A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar.” Whom was he referring to? **?** Who is soft as a reed in our story? Who is hard as a cedar?

**Bonus ?** After the incident, Rabbi Elazar enters (the Beit Midrash) immediately to teach: “A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar.” Why was this Rabbi Elazar’s first official lesson?

### **“The Question”**

**?** Why did Rabbi Elazar do such a shocking thing?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

### **“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text**

**!** “If you believe that you can destroy, believe that you can repair!”

! Repentance and Forgiveness: "not suitable for cedars."



In this story, we find an obnoxious, mean, even cruel Rabbi Elazar. The story is even more shocking if we consider that Rabbi Elazar had just completed his formal Torah studies, and that his father, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoachai, was one of the greatest Rabbis of all times. The main question the reader has is: why would Rabbi Elazar do such a terrible thing. However, as important as this question is for the reader, it is not central to the author of our story, who is more interested in exploring how to repair a mess than to explain it. Rabbi Elazar's lesson - A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar- is directed to himself, to the ugly man, and to his students (and by extension to us, the readers), reminding all of us that repentance and forgiveness are impossible without flexibility.