

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [290]

Woe to You, My Two Arms, as They Are Like Two Torah Scrolls That Are Being Rolled Up! (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 68a)



Background to Our Story

The Oven of Akhnai Story in Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 59b

We learned in a mishna there (*Kelim* 5:10): If one cut an earthenware oven widthwise into segments, and placed sand between each and every segment, Rabbi Eliezer deems it ritually pure. Because of the sand, its legal status is not that of a complete vessel, and therefore it is not susceptible to ritual impurity. And the Rabbis deem it ritually impure, as it is functionally a complete oven.

And this is known as the oven of *akhnai*. The Gemara asks: What is the relevance of *akhnai*, a snake, in this context? Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: It is characterized in that manner due to the fact that the Rabbis surrounded it with their statements like this snake, which often forms a coil when at rest, and deemed it impure.

The Sages taught: On that day, when they discussed this matter, Rabbi Eliezer answered all possible answers in the world to support his opinion, but the Rabbis did not accept his explanations from him.

After failing to convince the Rabbis logically, Rabbi Eliezer said to them: If the *halakha* is in accordance with my opinion, this carob tree will prove it. The carob tree was uprooted from its place one hundred cubits, and some say four hundred cubits. The Rabbis said to him: One does not cite halakhic proof from the carob tree.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the *halakha* is in accordance with my opinion, the stream will prove it. The water in the stream turned backward and began flowing in the opposite direction. They said to him: One does not cite halakhic proof from a stream.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the *halakha* is in accordance with my opinion, the walls of the study hall will prove it. The walls of the study hall leaned inward and began to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua scolded the walls and said to them: If Torah scholars

are contending with each other in matters of *halakha*, what is the nature of your involvement in this dispute? The Gemara relates: The walls did not fall because of the deference due Rabbi Yehoshua, but they did not straighten because of the deference due Rabbi Eliezer, and they still remain leaning.

Rabbi Eliezer then said to them: If the *halakha* is in accordance with my opinion, Heaven will prove it. A Divine Voice emerged from Heaven and said: Why are you disputing with Rabbi Eliezer, as the *halakha* is in accordance with his opinion in every place that he expresses an opinion?

Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: It is written: "It is not in heaven" (Deuteronomy 30:12). The Gemara asks: What is the relevance of the phrase "It is not in heaven" in this context? Rabbi Yirmeya says: Since the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Divine Voice, as You already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: "After a majority to incline" (Exodus 23:2). Since the majority of Rabbis disagreed with Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, the *halakha* is not ruled in accordance with his opinion. The Gemara relates: Years after, Rabbi Natan encountered Elijah the prophet and said to him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time, when Rabbi Yehoshua issued his declaration? Elijah said to him: The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me.

The Sages said: On that day, the Sages brought all the ritually pure items deemed pure by the ruling of Rabbi Eliezer and burned them in fire, and the Sages reached a consensus in his regard and ostracized him.

And the Sages said: Who will go and inform him of his ostracism?

Rabbi Akiva, his beloved disciple, said to them: I will go, lest an unseemly person go, and he would thereby destroy the entire world.

What did Rabbi Akiva do? He wore black and wrapped himself in black, as an expression of mourning and pain, and sat before Rabbi Eliezer at a distance of four cubits, which is the distance that one must maintain from an ostracized individual. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Akiva, what is different about today from other days, that you comport yourself in this manner?

Rabbi Akiva said to him: My teacher, it appears to me that your colleagues are distancing themselves from you.

Rabbi Eliezer too, rent his garments and removed his shoes, as is the custom of an ostracized person, and he dropped from his seat and sat upon the ground. His eyes shed tears, and as a result the entire world was afflicted: One-third of its olives were afflicted, and one-third of its wheat, and one-third of its barley. And some say that even dough kneaded in a woman's hands spoiled.

The Sages taught: There was great anger on that day, as any place that Rabbi Eliezer fixed his gaze was burned. And even Rabban Gamliel, the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin at Yavne, the head of the Sages who were responsible for the decision to ostracize Rabbi Eliezer, was coming on a boat at the time, and a large wave swelled over him and threatened to drown him. Rabban Gamliel said: It seems to me that this is only for the sake of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. Rabban Gamliel stood on his feet and said: Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that neither was it for my honor that I acted when ostracizing him, nor was it for the honor of the house of my father that I acted; rather, it was for Your honor, so that disputes will not proliferate in Israel. In response, the sea calmed from its raging.

The Gemara further relates: Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, was the sister of Rabban Gamliel. From that incident forward, she would not allow Rabbi Eliezer to

lower his head and recite the *taḥanun* prayer, which includes supplication and entreaties. She feared that were her husband to bemoan his fate and pray at that moment, her brother would be punished. A certain day was around the day of the New Moon, and she inadvertently substituted a full thirty-day month for a deficient twenty-nine-day month, i.e., she thought that it was the New Moon, when one does not lower his head in supplication, but it was not. Some say that a pauper came and stood at the door, and she took bread out to him. The result was that she left her husband momentarily unsupervised.

When she returned, she found him and saw that he had lowered his head in prayer. She said to him: Arise, you already killed my brother. Meanwhile, the sound of a *shofar* emerged from the house of Rabban Gamliel to announce that the *Nasi* had died. Rabbi Eliezer said to her: From where did you know that your brother would die? She said to him: This is the tradition that I received from the house of the father of my father: All the gates of Heaven are apt to be locked, except for the gates of prayer for victims of verbal mistreatment.

The Tannaim



The *Tannaim* (Hebrew: תנאים, singular תנא, *tanna*) were the Rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, from approx. 70-200 C.E. The period of the *Tannaim*, also referred to as the Mishnaic period, lasted about 130 years. It followed the period of the *Zugot* ("pairs"), and was immediately succeeded by the period of the *Amoraim*.

The root *tanna* (תנא) is the Talmudic Aramaic equivalent for the Hebrew root *shanah* (שנה), which also is the root-word of *Mishnah*. The verb *shanah* (שנה) literally means "to repeat [what one was taught]" and is used to mean "to learn".

The Mishnaic period is commonly divided up into five periods according to generations. There are approximately 120 known *Tannaim*.

The *Tannaim* lived in several areas of the Land of Israel. The spiritual center of Judaism at that time was Jerusalem, but after the destruction of the city and the Second Temple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai and his students founded a new religious center in Yavne. Other places of Judaic learning were founded by his students in Lod and in Bnei Brak.

Many of the *Tannaim* worked as laborers (e.g., charcoal burners, cobblers) in addition to their positions as teachers and legislators. They were also leaders of the people and negotiators with the Roman Empire.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Bava Metzia Volume I. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 325](#)

When the name Rabbi Eliezer occurs in the Talmud without a patronymic, it refers to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, also known as Rabbi Eliezer the Great, who was one of the leading Sages in the period after the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbi Eliezer was born to a wealthy family of Levites, who traced their lineage back to Moses. Rabbi Eliezer began studying Torah late in life, but he quickly became an outstanding disciple of Rabban

Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai remarked: If all the Sages of Israel were on one side of a scale and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus on the other, he would outweigh them all. Rabbi Eliezer was blessed with a remarkable memory. All his life, in his Torah study and his halakhic rulings, he attempted to follow the traditions of his Rabbis without adding to them. Nevertheless, although he was the primary student of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who was a disciple of Beit Hillel, he was considered one who tended toward the opinions of Beit Shammai. Rabbi Eliezer's close friend, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya, completely followed the opinions of Beit Hillel, and many fundamental halakhic disputes between these Sages are recorded in the Mishna. Because of his staunch and unflinching adherence to tradition, Rabbi Eliezer was unwilling to accede to the majority opinion. Rabbi Eliezer's conduct generated so much tension among the Sages that Rabban Gamliel, who was the brother of his wife, Imma Shalom, was forced to excommunicate him to prevent controversy from proliferating. This ban was lifted only after Rabbi Eliezer's death. All of the Sages of the next generation were Rabbi Eliezer's students, most prominent among them Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Eliezer's son, also named Hyrcanus, was a Sage of the following generation.

Joshua ben Hananiah was a leading tanna of the first half-century following the destruction of the Temple. He was of Levitical descent (Ma'as. Sh. v. 9), and served in the sanctuary as a member of the class of singers (Arakhin 11b). His mother intended him for a life of study, and, as an older contemporary, Dosa b. Harkinas, relates (Yer. Yeb. 3a), she carried the child in his cradle into the synagogue, so that his ears might become accustomed to the sounds of the words of the Torah. It was probably with reference to his pious mother that Johanan b. Zakkai thus expressed himself concerning Joshua ben Hananiah: "Hail to thee who gave him birth" (Ab. ii. 8). According to another tradition (Ab. R. N. xiv.) Johanan b. Zakkai praised him in the words from Eccl. iv. 12: "And a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Perhaps he meant that in Joshua the three branches of traditional learning, Midrash, Halakha, and Aggadah, were united in a firm whole; or possibly he used the passage in the sense in which it was employed later (Eccl. R. iv. 14; B. B. 59a), to show that Joshua belonged to a family of scholars even to the third generation.

Rabbi Akiva



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbi_Akiva

Akiva ben Joseph (ca.17–ca.137 CE) simply known as Rabbi Akiva (Hebrew: רבי עקיבא), was a tanna of the latter part of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century (3rd tannaitic generation). He was a great authority in the matter of Jewish tradition, and one of the most central and essential contributors to the Mishnah and Midrash Halakha. He is referred to in the Talmud as "*Rosh la-Chachamim*" (Head of all the Sages). He is considered by tradition to be one of the earliest founders of rabbinical Judaism. He is the seventh most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.^[2] Akiva ben Joseph (ca.17–ca.137 CE) simply known as Rabbi Akiva (Hebrew: רבי עקיבא), was a tanna of the latter part of the 1st century and the beginning of the 2nd century (3rd tannaitic generation). He was a great authority in the matter of Jewish tradition, and one of the most central and essential contributors to the Mishnah and Midrash Halakha. He is referred to in the Talmud as "*Rosh la-Chachamim*" (Head of all the Sages). He is considered by tradition to be one of the earliest founders of rabbinical Judaism. He is the seventh most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 68a

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְנָנְסוּ רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחִבֵּירִי לְבַקְרוּ.

הוא יושב בקינוח שלו, והן יושבין בטרקלין שלו.

ואתו היום ערב שבת היה, ונכנס הורקנוס בנו לחלוץ תפליו. גער בו ויצא בגזיפה. אמר להן לחביריו: 'כמדומה אני שדעתו של אבא נטרפה'. אמר להן: 'דעתו ודעת אמו נטרפה. היאך מניחין איסור סקילה, ועוסקין באיסור שבות?'

כיון שראו חכמים שדעתו מיושבת עליו, נכנסו וישבו לפניו מרחוק ארבע אמות.

אמר להם: 'למה באתם?' אמרו לו: 'ללמוד תורה באנו'. אמר להם: 'ועד עכשיו, למה לא באתם?' אמרו לו: 'לא היה לנו פנאי'. אמר להן: 'תמיתה אני אם ימותו מיתת עצמן'. אמר לו רבי עקיבא: 'שלי, מהו?' אמר לו: 'שלה קשה משלהן'.

נטל שתי זרועותיו, והניחן על לבו, אמר: אוי לכם, שתי זרועותיי, שהן פשתי ספרי תורה שנגללין. הרבה תורה למדתי, והרבה תורה לימדתי. הרבה תורה למדתי, ולא חסרתי מרבתי, אפילו ככלב המלקק מן היים. הרבה תורה לימדתי, ולא חסרוני תלמידי אלא כמכחול בשפופרת. ולא עוד, אלא שאני שונה שלש מאות הלכות בבקרת עזה, ולא היה אדם שואלני בהן דבר מעולם. ולא עוד, אלא שאני שונה שלש מאות הלכות, ואמרי לה שלשת אלפים הלכות, בגטיעת קשואין, ולא היה אדם שואלני בהן דבר מעולם, חוץ מעקיבא בן יוסף.

פעם אחת, אני והוא מהלכין היינו בדרך. אמר לי: 'רבי, למדני בגטיעת קשואין'. אמרתי דבר אחד נתמלאה כל השדה קשואין. אמר לי: 'רבי, למדני גטיעתן – למדני עקי רתן'. אמרתי דבר אחד, נתקבצו כולן למקום אחד. אמרו לו: 'הפדור, והאמוס, והקמיע, וצרור המרגליות, ומשקולת קטנה, מהו?' אמר להן: 'הן טמאין, וטהרותן במה שהן'. 'מגעל שעל גבי האמוס, מהו?' אמר להן: 'הוא טהור'. ויצאה נשמתו בטקרה.

עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו, ואמר: 'הותר הנדר, הותר הנדר!'

למוצאי שבת פגע בו רבי עקיבא מן קסרי ללוד. היה מכה בבשרו עד שדמו שותת לארץ. פתח עליו בשורה, ואמר: "אבי, אבי, רכב ישראל, ופרשיו". הרבה מעות יש לי, ואין לי שולחני להרצותי".

When Rabbi Eliezer took ill, Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues came to visit him.

He was sitting on his canopied bed [*bekinof*], and they were sitting in his parlor [*biteraklin*]; they did not know if he would be able to receive them, due to his illness.

And that day was Shabbat eve, and Rabbi Eliezer's son Hyrcanus entered to remove his phylacteries (tefillin), his father berated him, and he left reprimanded. Hyrcanus said to his father's colleagues: It appears to me that father went insane.

Rabbi Eliezer heard this and said to them [to the Sages]: He, Hyrcanus, and his mother went insane. How can they neglect Shabbat preparations with regard to prohibitions punishable by stoning, such as lighting the candles and preparing hot food, and engage in preparations concerning prohibitions by rabbinic decree, such as wearing phylacteries on Shabbat?

Since the Sages perceived from this retort that his mind was stable, they entered and sat before him at a distance of four cubits, as he was ostracized (see *Bava Metzia* 59b). It is forbidden to sit within four cubits of an ostracized person.

Rabbi Eliezer said to them: Why have you come? They said to him: We have come to study Torah, as they did not want to say that they came to visit him due to his illness.

Rabbi Eliezer said to them: And why have you not come until now? They said to him: We did not have spare time. Rabbi Eliezer said to them: I would be surprised if these Sages die their own death, i.e., a natural death. Rabbi Akiva said to him: How will my death come about? Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Your death will be worse than theirs, as you were my primary student and you did not come to study.

Rabbi Eliezer raised his two arms and placed them on his heart, and he said: Woe to you, my two arms, as they are like two Torah scrolls that are now being rolled up, and will never be opened again. I have learned much Torah, and I have taught much Torah. I have learned much Torah, and I have not taken away from my teachers, i.e., I have not received from their wisdom, even like a dog lapping from the sea. I have taught much Torah, and my students have taken away from me, i.e., they have received from my wisdom, only like the tiny amount that a paintbrush removes from a tube of paint. Moreover, I can teach three hundred *halakhot* with regard to a snow-white leprous mark [*bebaheret*], but no person has ever asked me anything about them. Moreover, I can teach three hundred *halakhot*, and some say that Rabbi Eliezer

said three thousand *halakhot*, with regard to the planting of cucumbers by sorcery, but no person has ever asked me anything about them, besides Akiva ben Yosef.

Rabbi Eliezer described the incident: Once he and I were walking along the way, and he said to me: My teacher, teach me about the planting of cucumbers. I said one statement of sorcery, and the entire field became filled with cucumbers. He said to me: My teacher, you have taught me about planting them; teach me about uprooting them. I said one statement and they all were gathered to one place.

After these comments, the Sages asked him questions of *halakha*: What is the *halakha*, with regard to ritual impurity, of a ball made of leather and stuffed with rags, and likewise a last, the frame on which a shoe is fashioned, which is made of leather and stuffed with rags, and likewise an amulet wrapped in leather, and a pouch for pearls, wrapped in leather, and a small weight, which is wrapped in leather? Rabbi Eliezer said to them: They are susceptible to impurity, and their purification is effected by immersing them in a ritual bath as they are, as there is no need to open them up.

They asked him further: What is the *halakha* with regard to a shoe that is on a last? Is it considered a complete vessel, which needs no further preparation, and is therefore susceptible to impurity? Rabbi Eliezer said to them: It is pure, and with this word, his soul left him in purity.

Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: The vow is permitted; the vow is permitted; i.e., the ostracism that was placed on Rabbi Eliezer is removed.

Rabbi Akiva was not present at the time of his death. At the conclusion of Shabbat, Rabbi Akiva encountered the funeral procession on his way from Caesarea to Lod. Rabbi Akiva was striking his Flesh in terrible anguish and regret until his blood flowed to the earth. He began to eulogize Rabbi Eliezer in the row of those

comforting the mourners, and said: "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen" (II Kings 2:12). I have many coins, but I do not have a money changer to whom to give them!



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Rabbi Eliezer's son enter to remove his tefillin on Shabbat eve?

? How does Hyrcanus interpret his father's scolding?

Bonus ? What was the real reason Rabbi Eliezer reprimanded his son?

? How do the Sages understand Rabbi Eliezer's mind was stable?

? Why did the Sages sit at a distance of four cubits from Rabbi Eliezer?

Extra Bonus ? Why does Rabbi Eliezer ask his colleagues for the reason of their visit?

? Why do the Sages lie to Rabbi Eliezer regarding the reason of their visit?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What was the real reason for the Sages not coming all this time?

Bonus ? What did Rabbi Eliezer mean by the words: "I would be surprised if these die their own death"?

Extra Bonus ? Rabbi Akiva asked Rabbi Eliezer how will his death come about? What can we learn from this question?

For Deeper Consideration ? How can you describe the disposition of Rabbi Eliezer on the last day of his life?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why does Rabbi Eliezer brag about his knowledge?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why do the Sages ask Rabbi Eliezer questions?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why does Rabbi Eliezer address their questions even though his colleagues waited all this time to come to see him?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why do the students ask Rabbi Eliezer questions specifically regarding purity and impurity?

? Why is it significant about Rabbi Eliezer's last word (*tahor* - it is pure)?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Rabbi Yehoshua stand on his feet and revoke Rabbi Eliezer's ostracism? Why would such annulment be important after his death? Why is it important that Rabbi Yehoshua was the one who "permitted the vow"?

Extra Bonus ? Why is Rabbi Akiva taking Rabbi Eliezer's death so harshly?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? What does Rabbi Akiva mean by the expression "I have many coins, but I do not have a money changer to whom to give them!"?

? How could the expression “too little, too late” apply to the relationship between Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! “Too little, too late” – The tragic story of Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues, in which everybody loses.



Our story, a continuation of the Oven of Akhnai Story (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b), brings together the same personalities: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva. However, in our story, the still ostracized Rabbi Eliezer is about to die.

Our story exposes us to the grief of Rabbi Eliezer for all the Torah he wasn't allowed to share and also to the grief of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Eliezer's main student, for all the Torah he didn't learn and will never again learn from his teacher.

On the last day of his life, Rabbi Eliezer gets to teach Torah and he leaves this world doing what he loves the most. The feeling however is that it is “too little, too late,” leaving us, the reader, to reflect on our own relationships and how to fix what we have to fix in our own lives, so we don't leave this world with a feeling of “too little, too late.”