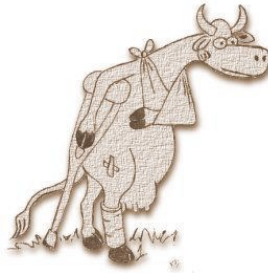


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## Stories with a Twist [56]

### “For my Own Benefit My Cow Was Maimed” (Insights into Genesis Rabbah 42:1)

Revised March 2023



#### Background to Our Story

##### Psalms 37:14-15

*14. The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to bring down the poor and needy, and to slay those who are of upright ways. 15. Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.*

##### Genesis 14:15

*14. And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them to Dan.*

*15. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and defeated them, and pursued them to Hobah, which is on the left side of Damascus.*

#### Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

Page 186

Nasi of the Sanhedrin following the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai was among the greatest leaders of Israel of any generation. A priest, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai was one of the youngest students of Hillel the Elder. He led Israel for many years of his long life. Prior to the destruction of the Temple he lived in Beror Ĥayil, afterwards he moved to the city of Arev.

#### Yochanan ben Zakai



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

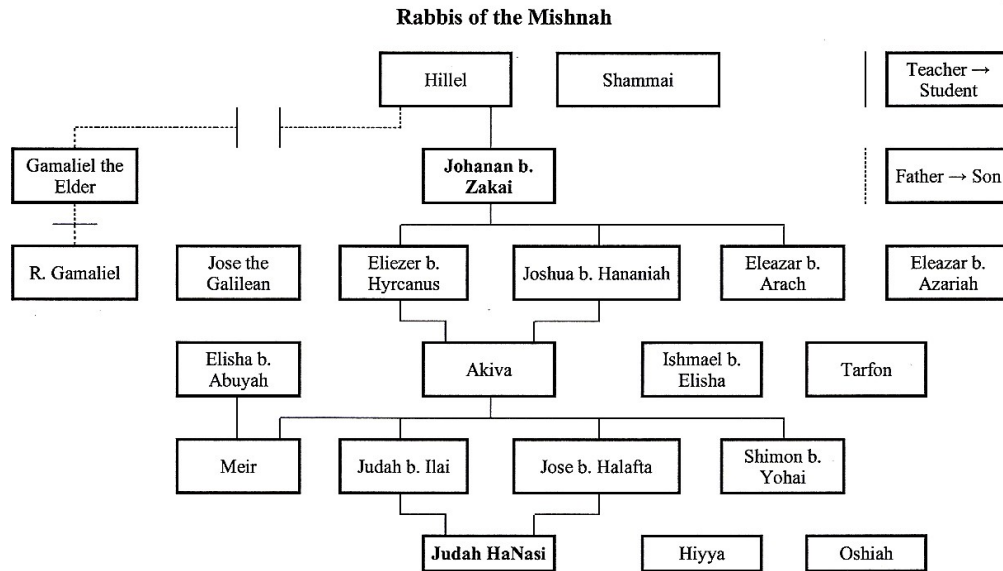
Johanan ben Zakai was one of the tannaim, an important Jewish sage in the era of the Second Temple, and a primary contributor to the core text of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah.

During the siege of Jerusalem in the Great Jewish Revolt he snuck out of the city in a coffin to negotiate with Vespasian, whom he predicted would become Emperor. He was granted three wishes and through one he re-established the Sanhedrin and founded a new center of Jewish law in Jamnia (Yavneh/Jabneh) after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. It is said that before his escape from Jerusalem, he prayed in a place which later on became known as the Rabban Johanan ben Zakai Synagogue.

After the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and its sacrificial altars he led the Council of Yavne (70-90 CE), from which Rabbinic Judaism emerged. Under his leadership the council replaced animal sacrifice (in Hebrew called korban) with prayer, a practice that continues in today's worship services.

The Mishnah offers no information on his birth or family. He was the youngest pupil of Hillel. Later in life he spent time in the Galilee. He is recorded as living until the age of 120 years, of which the first third were spent as a businessman, the second third in study, and the final third in teaching and leadership. He rests in the city of T'veria near the very place where the Rambam would be buried 11 centuries later.

He is quoted in the Midrash Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 31b as saying "If you are holding a sapling in your hand and someone tells you, 'Come quickly, the messiah is here!', first finish planting the tree and then go greet the Messiah."



### 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 Yoĥanan ben Zakkai. Rabban Yoĥanan 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 Yoĥanan 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 Hananya, 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.

### **Nakdimon ben Guryon**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

Nakdimon ben Guryon, whose Hebrew name appears to have been Boni, was one of the wealthiest men living in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. Tractate *Ta'anit* tells of the great sums of charity that he donated to the community and the miracle of the sun that was performed for him as a result.

### **Ben Kalba Savua**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

The family of ben Kalba Savua was one of the wealthiest and most powerful at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and in the period following, as is known from the story of Rabbi Akiva marrying one of the daughters of this family. It is said to trace its descent back to Caleb, the son of Jephunneh. The name Kalba seems to be based on this lineage rather than the explanation given in the Gemara here.

### **Ben Tzitzit HaKesat**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 314)

Ben Tzitzit HaKesat was one of the wealthiest Jews at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. The midrash in *Bereshit Rabba* notes that a genealogical scroll was found in Jerusalem listing the house of Tzitzit HaKesat as descending from King Saul's general, Abner, the son of Ner.

### **Vows and Annulment of Vows**

*"If a man takes a vow to G-d or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do"* (Numbers 30:3)

As part of the Oral Law we have a tradition that oaths can be nullified by a court [Talmud Chagigah 10a; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Shevuot* 6:1]. When a person regrets having ever taken an oath a court can declare his oath to be null and void. However, and this is crucial, there are severe limitations regarding which oaths a court is empowered to nullify.

Taking oaths is a worthy way of inducing oneself to act properly. Because of the power of an oath, it is an extremely useful psychological motivator. While Ecclesiastes (5:4) tells us "Better that you not vow at all than that you vow and not pay," there are times when vowing is beneficial in inducing proper behavior [see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Nedarim* 13:23; Talmud Chullin 2a-b].

## **The Text: Genesis Rabbah 42:1**

מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס שֶׁהָיוּ אֶחָיו חוֹרְשִׁים בְּמִישׁוֹר וְהוּא חוֹרֵשׁ בְּהָר וְנִפְלָה פָּרְתּוֹ וְנִשְׁבְּרָה, אָמַר לְטוֹבֹתַי נִשְׁבְּרָה פָּרְתִי, בָּרַח וְהִלֵּךְ לוֹ אֶצֶל רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַפְּאִי, וְהָיָה אוֹכֵל קוֹזְזוֹת אֲדָמָה, עַד שֶׁעָשָׂה פִּיּו רֵיחַ רַע, הִלְכוּ וְאָמְרוּ לְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַפְּאִי רֵיחַ פִּיּו שֶׁל רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר קָשָׁה לוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהִבְאִישׁ רֵיחַ פִּיךָ עַל הַתּוֹרָה, כִּי הָיָה רֵיחַ תְּלִמוּדֶךָ הוֹלֵךְ מִסוּף הָעוֹלָם וְעַד סוּפוֹ. לְאַחַר יָמִים עָלָה אָבִיו לְגִדּוּתוֹ מִנְּכֻסָיו, וּמִצָּאוּ יוֹשֵׁב וְדוֹרֵשׁ וּגְדוּלֵי מְדִינָתוֹ יוֹשְׁבִים לְפָנָיו, בֶּן צִיצִית הַכֶּסֶת וְנַקְדִּימוֹן בֶּן גּוּרְיוֹן וּבֶן כַּלְבָּא שְׂבוּעַ, וּמִצָּאוּ יוֹשֵׁב וְדוֹרֵשׁ הַפְּסוּקַת הַזֶּה, תָּרַב פְּתָחוֹ רְשָׁעִים וּגּוֹ', זֶה אִמְרָפֶל וְחַבְרִיו. לְהַפִּיל עָנִי וְאֲבִיוֹן, זֶה לוֹט. לְטַבּוֹת יִשְׂרָיִל דָּרָה, זֶה אֲבָרְהָם. תָּרַבִּם תְּבוּא בָלֶבֶם, (בְּרֵאשִׁית י"ד, טו): וַיִּחַלֵּק עֲלֵיהֶם לֵילָה הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו וַיִּכְּסוּ. אָמַר לוֹ אָבִיו בְּנִי לֹא עָלִיתִי לְכָאן אֲלֵא לְגִדּוּתֶךָ מִנְּכֻסִי, עֲכָשׁוּ הָרִי כֹל נְכֻסֵי נְתוּנִים לָךְ מִתְּנָה. אָמַר הָרִי הֵם עָלִי תָרַם וְאִינִי אֲלֵא שׁוּה בָּם כְּאֶחָי.

Rabbi Eliezer's brothers were once plowing in the plain, while he was plowing on the mountain, when his cow fell and was maimed.

He [Rabbi Eliezer] said: for my own benefit my cow was maimed, and fled to Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai.

There, he [Rabbi Eliezer] ate clods of earth until his mouth emitted a foul odor, and when they (the students) went and told Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai that the breath from Rabbi Eliezer's mouth smelt foul, he said to him: As the smell of your mouth became unpleasant for the sake of the Torah, so will the fragrance of your learning be diffused from one end of the world to the other.

After some time, his father came up to disinherit him, and found him sitting and lecturing with the greatest of the land sitting before him; Ben Tzitzit HaKesat, Nakdimon ben Guryon and Ben Kalba Savua

He [Rabbi Eliezer] was expounding this verse: *The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent the bow (Psalms 37:14)*: this alludes to Amraphel and his companions; *To cast down the poor and needy (ibid.)* - to Lot; *To slay such as are upright in the way (ibid.)* - to Abraham. *Their sword shall enter into their own heart (ibid. 15)*, as it is written, *And he fought against them by night, he and his servants, and smote them, etc. (Genesis 14:15)*.

Said his father to him; my son, I came up only to disinherit you; now, however, all my property is given to you as a gift.

Behold, he [Rabbi Eliezer] replied, let it be herem [accursed] to me; I will take only an equal share with my brothers.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** What was Rabbi Eliezer's occupation before he became a Torah scholar? Whom was he working for?

**?** What is the implication of the opening statement in our story: "Rabbi Eliezer's brothers were once plowing in the plain, while he was plowing on the mountain"?

**Extra Bonus ?** What did Rabbi Eliezer mean by the expression "for my own benefit my cow was maimed"?

**Bonus ?** Why did Rabbi Eliezer flee to Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai?

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

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

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

**Bonus ?** If Rabbi Eliezer wanted so much to learn Torah, why didn't he flee to Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai sooner?

**?** Why did Rabbi Eliezer eat clods of earth?

**?** Why did they (the students) tell Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai that the breath from Rabbi Eliezer's mouth smelt foul?

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

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

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

**?** Why did Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai give a blessing to Rabbi Eliezer?

**?** Why did Rabbi Eliezer's father come to Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai to disinherit his son? Why did he change his mind?

**Bonus ?** Can you find any self-references in Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation of the biblical verses?

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

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

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

**Bonus ?** Why do you think Rabbi Eliezer's father was particularly impressed when he saw his son teaching Torah? What can we learn from the above about Rabbi Eliezer's father's own scale of values?

**Bonus ?** Originally, Rabbi Eliezer's father wanted to exclude Rabbi Eliezer from his inheritance and now he wants to exclude his other sons from their inheritance. Why?

**Bonus ?** Why didn't Rabbi Eliezer accept his father's gift?

**?** What is the lesson Rabbi Eliezer is teaching his father by replying: "let it be herem [accursed] to me; I will take only an equal share with my brothers"?

**Extra Bonus ?** Why do you think Rabbi Eliezer didn't give up his share of the inheritance?

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

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

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

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

**!** The wisdom of recognizing the blessings in disguise, or, how challenging circumstances can help you reach your true potential and change your life."



In our story we find four prototypes of individuals.

Rabbi Eliezer, the main hero of our story, who correctly "reads the situation" in front of him. He sees in his bad luck - plowing in the mountain and getting his cow maimed - an opportunity to redirect his life and to do something worthy of his potential. Like in many rabbinic stories, the main hero is the one who undergoes a transformation.

Rabbi Eliezer's father, perhaps the villain in our story, as opposed to his son, cannot "read situations." He doesn't realize how special his son is; he doesn't know his son yearns to learn Torah or he doesn't care, he admires the wealth of his son's students more than his own son's wisdom, and he is ready to exclude his other sons from their inheritance the same way he was ready to exclude Rabbi Eliezer a moment before.

The other students, represent the average individual. They only read the superficiality of the situation: Rabbi Eliezer eats clods of earth. They don't see his potential nor show any initiative to help with the material needs of the newcomer.

Rabbi Yoĥanan ben Zakkai, the righteous teacher, sees Rabbi Eliezer's potential and understands the great future that awaits his new student, who, in time, will become his main disciple.