

18 going ON 70

The story behind Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and the day that forever changed the world

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WE SAY IT EVERY YEAR AT THE PESACH SEDER; in fact, it's one of the most well-known lines from the Haggadah: Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said, "I am like a seventy-year-old man..." But what does it mean? Why did he say it and what was his point that he was "like" a seventy-year-old man? He needed an afternoon nap? He was suffering from aches and pains?

And why would he think his status of being "like a seventy-year-old man" would be sufficient to convince his colleagues that he was right regarding the debate of whether

we need to remember *yetzias mitzrayim* (the exodus from Egypt) at night?

Your Haggadah may tell you that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was only eighteen years old when he made that statement – making it even more bizarre. It may even tell you that he was the *Nasi* (lit: the Prince), the leader of the nation. But why was a leader who was only eighteen years old chosen in the first place? Was there no one else more qualified who was a bit older and had some more experience going for him?

THE FINAL STRAW

As is popular today with storytelling, our story begins at...the end, complete with flashbacks to help fill in the back story as to just how we got here. So, we'll start, as the gemara does, with the third strike that led to the *Nasi*, Rabban Gamliel, being called "out" and replaced with Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah – and in the course of recounting the story, we'll detail the other two strikes, the prior incidents that lead up to that final, fateful decision to remove him.

Our story begins with a question asked by one of the most well-known rabbis from the gemara, the student of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya whether davening *maariv* (the evening prayer) was optional or obligatory.¹ Rabbi Yehoshua answered that it was optional. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai then went and asked the same question to Rabban Gamliel, who was the *Nasi* at the time and who answered the exact opposite, saying that it was an obligation. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai wasted no time informing Rabban Gamliel of what

Rabbi Yehoshua had said. Rabban Gamliel instructed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to wait until the *chochomim* (Torah scholars) came to the *beis medrash* and then to ask the question again in front of everyone, which he did, at which point Rabban Gamliel answered as he had before and then said to everyone present, "Is there anyone who disagrees?"

Rabbi Yehoshua said, "No," and Rabban Gamliel informed him that he'd already been told that Rabbi Yehoshua disagreed. Rabban Gamliel then said,

“AS IS POPULAR TODAY WITH STORYTELLING, OUR STORY BEGINS AT THE END, WITH FLASHBACKS TO PRIOR INCIDENTS TO HELP FILL IN THE BACK STORY AS TO HOW WE GOT HERE.”

“Yehoshua, stand on your feet so that they can testify against you!” Rabbi Yehoshua complied and stood on his feet, saying that he had no choice but to admit that he had indeed said it.

Rabban Gamliel sat down and began to teach, leaving Rabbi Yehoshua standing. Outraged by the tremendous disrespect being shown to Rabbi Yehoshua, all those present in the beis medrash immediately complained to the *turgamon* (the person responsible for repeating over what the teacher was saying, in this case Rabban Gamliel, so that everyone could hear, sort of like a manual public address system) that he should be silent, and he complied

with their demand and was silent. You see, those present had finally reached their limit with Rabban Gamliel because this was far from the first run-in between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua.

THE FIRST INCIDENT

They proceeded to review Rabban Gamliel's history of disrespectful behaviour towards Rabbi Yehoshua, starting with an incident that took place the previous year, when Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua had a dispute over the testimony of witnesses to the new moon, who had come to testify before the Sanhedrin, and Rabban Gamliel had again pained Rabbi

Yehoshua. Although Rabban Gamliel had accepted the testimony of these two witnesses, Rabbi Dosa ben Hurkenos thought that these two witnesses were lying, and Rabbi Yehoshua agreed with him.

What did it matter? The determination of the new moon (ie. Rosh Chodesh), which can fall out on only one of two days each month (which is why we celebrate two days of Yom Tov here in the diaspora), governs when Yom Tov falls out in that month. According to Rabban Gamliel's acceptance of the witnesses' testimony, Yom Tov, in this case Yom Kippur, would fall out, let's say on a Tuesday, and according to Rabbi Yehoshua, who held the new moon would only occur on the next day, Yom Kippur would, consequently, fall out a day later, on Wednesday. Obviously, this has significant implications because we are prohibited from doing *malacha* (certain creative labours) on Yom Tov, so we need to know which day it really is.

Rabban Gamliel sent a message to Rab-

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bi Yehoshua, “I decree upon you that you will come to me with your staff and your money on the day that Yom Kippur falls out according to your calculation.” In other words, Rabban Gamliel was saying: I want you *davka* to engage in what would be prohibited activities on the day that you think, according to your calculation, is Yom Tov! Rabbi Yehoshua’s student, Rabbi Akiva, went to him and found him distressed over the *Nasi* having decreed upon him that he must desecrate the day that he maintained was Yom Kippur.

Attempting to comfort his teacher and explain why he needed to comply with Rabban Gamliel’s decree, Rabbi Akiva brought a proof that Hashem has left it up to Beis Din (the Sanhedrin) to determine when Rosh Chodesh is and, as a consequence of that determination, when each Yom Tov falls out. And, even if, *chas v’shalom*, Beis Din is mistaken in its determination regarding Rosh Chodesh, which would obviously impact when Yom Tov is celebrated as well, nonetheless the day that becomes designated as Yom Tov, as a result of their determination regarding the new moon, is yom tov, regardless of any errors involved. Rabbi Yehoshua told Rabbi Akiva that he had comforted him.

Rabbi Yehoshua then went to the person who had started the whole controversy, Rabbi Dosa. Rabbi Dosa explained to Rabbi Yehoshua why he himself did not press the issue with Rabban Gamliel and why they were obligated to accept the decision of whoever had been selected to be the leader of the generation, in this case, Rabban Gamliel. When Rabbi Yehoshua saw that even Rabbi Dosa, who had originally pointed out the error in Rabban Gamliel’s judgment, no longer stood in opposition to Rabban Gamliel, he took his staff and his money in his hand and he went to Yavneh, where Rabban Gamliel resided, on the day that he had calculated Yom Kippur to fall out. When he came before Rabban Gamliel, Rabban Gamliel stood and kissed Rabbi Yehoshua on his head, saying, “Come in peace, my teacher and my student; my teacher in wisdom, and my student because you have accepted what I said.”

“THOSE PRESENT IN THE BEIS MEDRASH DECIDED THAT ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH AND REMOVED RABBAN GAMLIEL FROM HIS POSITION AS NASI.”



THE SECOND INCIDENT

But there was more. Those present for the latest incident between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua continued their discussion, recalling yet another incident, revolving around when Rabbi Tzaddok had come to inquire² from the two of them and Rabban Gamliel had again pained Rabbi Yehoshua with his behaviour. Rabbi Tzaddok, who was a Kohen, had come to inquire regarding a firstborn animal of his that had split its lip while eating. The question was whether there was a difference between a Kohen *chaver* (someone who is precise in his mitzvah observance) and a Kohen *am ha'aretz* (someone who is uneducated and ignorant about mitzvot) and whether a Kohen *chaver* could be relied upon to say that a firstborn animal belonging to him had become accidentally blemished. A firstborn animal must be given to a Kohen, who then must bring it as a korban (offering), unless it gets a blemish, in which case the Kohen can shecht it and eat it – so clearly a Kohen would have a vested interest in seeing that a firstborn

animal would become blemished so that he could take it for his own.

Rabbi Yehoshua said that there was a difference (ie. a Kohen *chaver* could be relied upon to say that the animal had been unintentionally blemished), but Rabban Gamliel said that there was no difference (ie. the testimony of a Kohen *chaver* was given no greater validity than that of an *am ha'aretz*). Again, Rabban Gamliel found out about Rabbi Yehoshua’s contradictory answer and instructed Rabbi Tzaddok to wait until the *chochomim* came to the beis medrash and repeat the question in front of everyone, which he did, at which point Rabban Gamliel answered as he had before and then said to everyone present, “Is there anyone who disagrees?”

Rabbi Yehoshua said, “No,” and Rabban Gamliel informed him that he’d already been told that Rabbi Yehoshua disagreed. Rabban Gamliel then said, “Yehoshua, stand on your feet so that they can testify against you!” Rabbi Yehoshua complied and stood on his feet, saying that he had no choice but to admit that he had indeed said it. Again, Rabban Gamliel sat and be-



“ON THE DAY THAT RABBI ELAZAR BEN AZARYAH ASSUMED THE POSITION OF NASI, HE REMOVED THE GUARD AT THE ENTRANCE, AND EVERY STUDENT WAS GIVEN PERMISSION TO ENTER. SO MANY STUDENTS CAME THAT THEY NEEDED TO ADD MANY MORE BENCHES.”

gan to teach, leaving Rabbi Yehoshua standing as he was, until all those present, who were outraged at the disrespect being shown to Rabbi Yehoshua, complained to the *turgamon* to be silent and he complied with their demand.

THREE STRIKES, YOU'RE OUT

Those present in the beis medrash for the argument over Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's question, the third such occasion in which Rabban Gamliel had been disrespectful to Rabbi Yehoshua and subsequently pained and disrespected him, decided that enough was enough and removed Rabban Gamliel from his position as *Nasi*. Their next order of business was to consider who to appoint in his place. They first considered appointing Rabbi Yehoshua, but quickly decided against it because he was a party to the incident and, were they to appoint him in

place of Rabban Gamliel, it would, no doubt, cause great pain to Rabban Gamliel. They next considered appointing Rabbi Akiva, but again, quickly dismissed the idea, recognising that Rabban Gamliel might cause Divine punishment to come upon Rabbi Akiva and that Rabbi Akiva, who was descended from *geirim* (converts), lacked *zechus avos* (merit from the forefathers) to save him.

Finally, the moment we've all been waiting for...they considered appointing none other than Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah because, despite his tender years, he possessed all of the traits that would make him an ideal replacement: firstly, he had wisdom – meaning that if he was asked something, he could answer. In fact, Rabbi Yehoshua would later say about him³ after he had been appointed as *Nasi* that, “No generation in which Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah lives is considered orphaned [ie.

without leadership].” Secondly, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah had wealth – meaning that he was able to pay tribute to the Caesar and even, if necessary, travel on behalf of the people to the Caesar. The *gemara*⁴ notes that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah would separate 12 000 calves for the tithe of his cattle each year, meaning that he had 120 000 cattle born annually to his herds – a mindboggling number. Finally, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah had *yichus* (lineage) – he was a tenth generation descendant of Ezra the Scribe, so he had *zechus avos* and, therefore, he would be saved from any Divine punishment that Rabban Gamliel might cause to come upon him.

So, they went to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and asked him if he would become the *Nasi*. He said that he first needed to consult with his family and immediately proceeded to go and consult with his wife, who would be significantly affected by his change in position and the demands on his time that it would entail. She said, “Maybe they'll remove you (like they're doing to Rabban Gamliel)?” He responded with what must have been a well-known saying, “Let a man use a (glass) cup of honour for a day even if it will be broken tomorrow!” She said, “You don't have any white hair in your beard.” He was eighteen years old that day and a miracle occurred: eighteen rows of white hair appeared in his beard, which explains what Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said [in a prior mishna in the same *mesechta*], “Behold, I am like a seventy-year-old man...”

When Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah made this statement, the very statement which we find included in our Haggadah, he was saying that, although he had merited to become the *Nasi*, the leader of the Jewish people, he still could not convince his colleagues that he was right about the obligation to recall the exodus from Egypt each night. As we'll see in a moment, it was Ben Zoma who made the winning argument, but it was thanks to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah that Ben Zoma was able to do it!

A VERY SPECIAL DAY

Under Rabban Gamliel's tenure as *Nasi*, a guard was placed at the door to the beis

medrash and only the very best of the best students were allowed to come inside. On the day that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah assumed the position of *Nasi*, however, he removed this guard, and every student was given permission to enter. So many students came that they needed to add many more benches – according to one opinion, 400 more benches, and according to another opinion, 700 more benches. When Rabban Gamliel saw how many students had come into the beis medrash, he feared that on account of his extremely restrictive entrance policy, Torah had been withheld from Israel. In order to comfort him, he had a dream that assured him that the students he had prohibited were not fit – but this was not, in fact, the case – he had erred.

On that day that the beis medrash was opened for all students to enter, the result was an entire *mesechta* full of teachings – *mesechta Eduyot* (lit: Testimonies) – that were transmitted and recorded. In

fact, so great was the learning that took place on that day that there was no halacha that hung in doubt and which was not fully explained. Rashi comments⁵ that it was this very same day that Ben Zoma came to the beis medrash and made his argument that we find in our Haggadah regarding the obligation to recall the exodus from Egypt each and every night!⁶

Despite his having been removed as the *Nasi*, even Rabban Gamliel came to the Beis Medrash that day. Imagine being demoted as a senior lecturer and still showing up to the class to study! And, hard as it may be to believe, on that very day, Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua had, yet, another disagreement. This time, however, Rabban Gamliel's opinion was not simply accepted as the final judgment and he and Rabbi Yehoshua debated the topic in front of everyone. To his great surprise, the debate was settled in favour of Rabbi Yehoshua. When he saw what had hap-

pened, Rabban Gamliel decided to go and appease Rabbi Yehoshua, eventually succeeding in obtaining his forgiveness.

THE AFTERMATH

As it turned out, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah's wife was right to be concerned that the same thing that happened to Rabban Gamliel might happen to him, as the *chochomim* nearly removed him as *Nasi* straight away as a result of Rabbi Yehoshua having forgiven Rabban Gamliel. In fact, even Rabbi Yehoshua himself advocated for Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah to be removed and for Rabban Gamliel to be restored to his former position. After some debate as to how to respectfully handle the situation, however, it was decided that it would be inappropriate simply to remove Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah as *Nasi* and, instead, a compromise solution was settled upon: Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah would share the position, with Rabban Gamliel giving the *shiur*



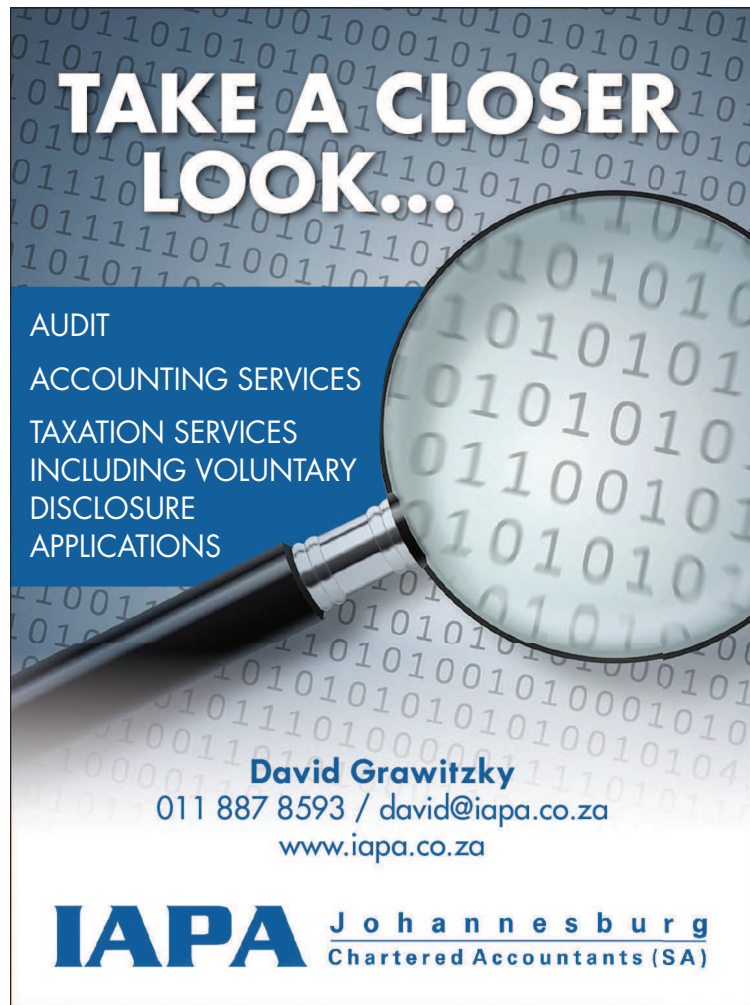
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in the beis medrash three weeks out of every four and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah giving it the remaining week.

A NAGGING QUESTION

So, why would Rabban Gamliel behave in such a fashion? Surely rabbis don't make a habit of embarrassing their colleagues or behaving inappropriately – there must have been something else going on. We find the answer in one of the most famous and well-known incidents in the gemara⁷, which rather interestingly also appears to testify to Rabbi Yehoshua's change of heart as well.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanas had a dispute with the *chochomim* over the ritual purity status of an oven. Rabbi Eliezer brought "all the answers in the world", but still, the *chochomim* refused to accept what he said. Rabbi Eliezer then began moving Heaven and earth – quite literally

– to prove that he was right, asking for objects such as a carob tree, a stream, and even the walls of the beis medrash to testify on his behalf, before finally crying out to Heaven and having a *bas kol* (a Heavenly voice) call out in his favour, asking those present why they were arguing with Rabbi Eliezer since the halacha was always like him and seemingly settling things in his favour once and for all.

Ironically, it was none other than Rabbi Yehoshua who stood up against Rabbi Eliezer, perhaps having learned from his own previous experiences, rising to his feet to defend the *chochomim* against Rabbi Eliezer by quoting the well-known verse⁸ from the Torah, "Lo b'shamayim hi – the Torah is not in Heaven," meaning that Hashem gave His Torah into the hands of man, and provided along with it rules for how to settle disputes when they arise. Rabbi Yehoshua insisted that

Rabbi Eliezer play by those rules and follow the opinion of the majority.

As a result of his unwillingness to back down and accept the majority's decision, however, Rabbi Eliezer was placed in cherem (excommunicated) and, when he was later informed of this, he was so upset that he nearly destroyed the world. Rabban Gamliel, who was the *Nasi* and who Rabbi Eliezer blamed for his predicament, was travelling on a ship at the time, when suddenly a tremendous wave, a tsunami, arose, threatening to destroy the ship and drown him. Recognising immediately that it had to be because of Rabbi Eliezer, he stood up and called out, "Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that, not for my honour did I act, nor for the honour of the house of my father, only for Your honour that *machlokes* (arguments) should not increase in Israel (ie. that an individual should not become accustomed to going against the majority)." And the sea calmed from its raging. (Although Rabban Gamliel survived that day, Rabbi Eliezer eventually succeeded in bringing about his demise.) So, we see why Rabban Gamliel behaved the way he did with Rabbi Yehoshua, choosing to make an example of him in order to prevent others from copying behaviour that Rabban Gamliel saw as potentially destructive for the nation.

And that's the story behind how an eighteen-year-old became the leader of the Jewish people, meriting to be mentioned not once, but twice in the Haggadah. **IL**

¹Brachos 27b

²Bechoros 36a

³Chagiga 3b. The comment is especially ironic, as it was Rabbi Yehoshua who sought to see Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah removed as Nasi after he forgave Rabban Gamliel!

⁴Shabbos 54b

⁵Brachos 12b

⁶But see Likutei Bassar Likutei on Avos 4:1 and Brachos 12b, in which Rabbi Shmuel Alter argues that the statement made by Ben Zoma that day which convinced the Sages to listen to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was the one found in Avos 4:1, "Ben Zoma said, 'Who is wise? He who learns from every man...'" (With thanks to Aron Ziegler for showing me this.)

⁷Bava Metzia 59b

⁸Devarim 30:12