

Party for FIVE

It's one of the most well-known episodes in the Haggadah, but why were all of those famous Rabbis gathered in Bnei Brak together? **BY ROBERT SUSSMAN**



THE HAGGADAH FAMOUSLY SPEAKS OF THE FIVE

Rabbis who gathered in Bnei Brak for the Pesach seder – Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon – and who spent the entire night discussing the going out from Egypt, until their students came to inform them that the time had come for the morning reading of the shema – meaning that they had fulfilled their obligation of talking about the going out from Egypt to the fullest extent possible and, now, a new obligation, ie. the reading of the shema, had begun.

Rebbe Eliezer¹ and Rabbi Tarfon² resided in Lod and Rebbe Yehoshua resided in Peki'in³, so why were they all sitting far from their own homes on Pesach in Bnei Brak, where Rebbe Akiva resided⁴?

Furthermore, Rebbe Eliezer and Rebbe Yehoshua were the teachers of Rebbe Akiva, so surely it would have been more appropriate for Rabbi Akiva to have been a guest at one of their homes, rather than the two of

them spending Pesach at his home.

And the question can be made even stronger if we consider that Rebbe Eliezer famously held⁵ that it's prohibited to go out from one's house on the festivals. The gemara even tells a story of Rebbe Eliezer being in a different city on a festival and questions how it could be possible considering his own ruling, and concludes that it was not, in fact, a festival, but rather Shabbos when he had been in the other city. Accordingly, how is it possible that Rebbe Eliezer spent Pesach at his student's home, and not in his own home? What could have compelled him to be there? The commentators offer different answers.

MISSING THE BOAT

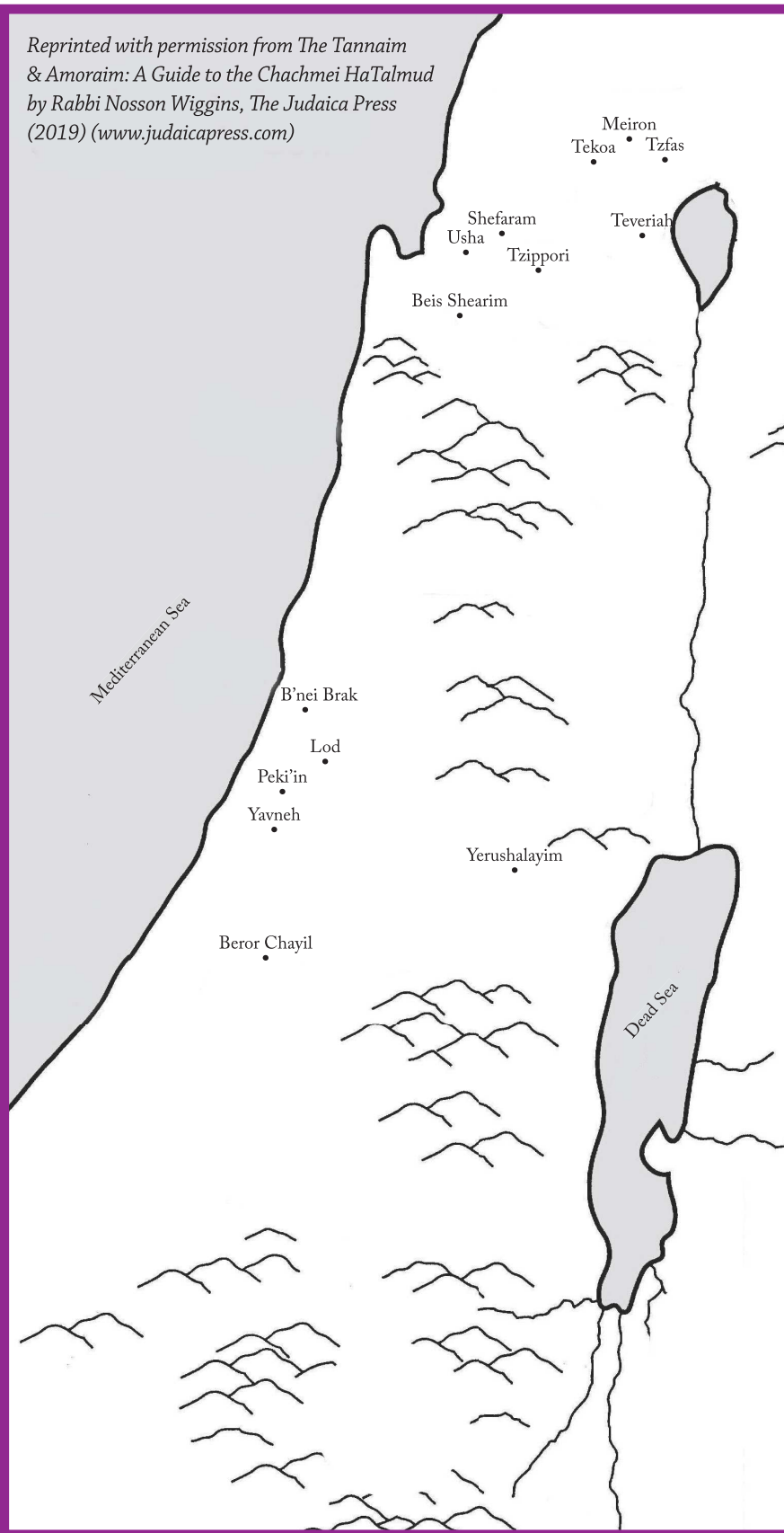
The Be'er Miriam answers that we find, for example, that Rabban Gamliel, who was the *Nasi* (lit: Prince; the leader of the people) and, as such, would have resided in Yavneh⁶, would often sail overseas for the needs of the community, with others in

his company. In fact, Rabban Gamliel and those who accompanied him once returned on a boat from one of their trips on an erev Pesach⁷. The midrash also notes⁸ occasions when Rabban Gamliel and others, including some of the above-named Rabbis, made trips to Rome.

Based upon this, it's possible that on this particular Pesach on which the incident recorded in the Haggadah took place, Rabban Gamliel and his entourage had arrived back in the port of Yaffa on erev Pesach and did not have sufficient time to return to their homes for Yom Tov. Therefore, they chose to spend Pesach in the city of Bnei Brak, which is next to Yaffa, because it is the place where Rabbi Akiva resided and, since Rabbi Akiva would have likely travelled together with them on the boat, his home would be the obvious choice to spend Pesach. In fact, it's likewise entirely possible that Rabban Gamliel was also with them in Bnei Brak, as Yavneh would have been too far for him to get back to, but that he did not sit together with the others at the Pesach seder because they would not have been able to recline in front of him out of respect. Therefore, the Haggadah specifically emphasises that "they were reclining", to teach that, since Rabban Gamliel was not present with them, they were all able to recline as required, as one would normally not recline in the presence of a great *Talmud Chochom* or, in this case, the *Gadol HaDor* (leader of the generation).⁹

The question then becomes how Rabbi Akiva was able to recline in front of his teachers, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, as ordinarily the *halacha* is that a student does not recline in the presence of his teacher, even if the teacher is not his primary teacher, unless the teacher gives him explicit permission.¹⁰ Some suggest¹¹ that, perhaps, Rabbi Akiva was considered a *Talmid Chaver* of his teachers – which Rashi defines¹² as someone who is a *chochom*

Reprinted with permission from *The Tannaim & Amoraim: A Guide to the Chachmei HaTalmud* by Rabbi Nosson Wiggins, The Judaica Press (2019) (www.judaicapress.com)



(learned) like his teachers, but that he learned from them one thing or more – and from this episode we see that a *Talmid Chaver* is obligated to recline before his teacher. Others maintain¹³ that Rabbi Akiva did not recline and that the intention of the statement that they reclined was not regarding him, as the primary purpose of relating the incident of the group staying up all night discussing the going out from Egypt had nothing to do with their reclining.

ANOTHER APPROACH

The Aruch HaShulchan suggests an entirely different approach, explaining that we can arrive at a possible answer to why these Rabbis were at the house of Rabbi Akiva by looking at the end of Mesechta Makos¹⁴. The gemara there tells of a couple of famous incidents involving Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva, beginning with the following: They were once traveling together and they heard the noise of Roman crowds from a distance of 120 *mil* away (one *mil* is equal to approximately one kilometre) and they began crying, but Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him, “Why are you laughing?” He said to them, “Why are you crying?”

They said to him, “These non-Jews bow down and burn incense to idols and they dwell in safety and tranquillity and we, the House (the Beis HaMikdash, Temple), which is the footstool of our G-d, is burned in fire, and we shouldn’t cry?” He said to them, “For this [reason] I’m laughing. Just as this [safety and calm] is so for those who go against His will, how much more so it will be those who do His will!”...They said to him these words, “Akiva, you have comforted us, Akiva, you have comforted us.”

JUST WHAT COMFORT?

It’s hard to understand what comfort he provided them. The Romans were living with ease and tranquillity despite their having destroyed Hashem’s House, whereas Israel was depressed and burdened with suffering. And, if Rabbi Akiva’s intention with his words of comfort was regarding *Olam HaBah* (The World to Come), it’s even more difficult, because surely the other Sages knew this already and, nevertheless, they

“WHEN THIS INCIDENT WITH THE NOISE OF THE ROMAN CROWDS DESCRIBED ABOVE TOOK PLACE, IT WAS, IN TERMS OF TIME, RELATIVELY CLOSE TO THE DESTRUCTION OF *BAYIS SHEINI* (THE SECOND TEMPLE) AND, LIKE THE *NAVI*, OUR SAGES FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE THAT THERE WOULD BE A RESTORATION AND REVIVAL OF ISRAEL – AS MANY JEWS LIKELY FELT AFTER THE HOLOCAUST.”

cried on the great suffering of Israel in *Olam HaZeh* (This world) – so we must say that Rabbi Akiva’s words which had comforted them were regarding *Olam HaZeh*, so what exactly was this comfort?

We can explain this by looking at the words of the *Navi* (prophet), *Yirmiyahu* (Jeremiah) in *Eichah* (Lamentations), which was written before the destruction of *Bayis Rishon* (the First Temple): “And I said, my strength is lost; my hope is from Hashem. To remember my sorrow and my bitterness, when I remembered, my soul was bowed low. This I shall recall, therefore I hope: the *chesed* (kindness) of Hashem has not ended; His *rachamim* (mercy) is not exhausted.”

CHESED FOR THEM, RACHAMIM FOR US

The *Navi* speaks in the last sentence quoted of *chesed* and *rachamim*. Although they are one subject, there is a difference between them: *chesed* doesn’t need to take precedence over *midas hadin* (the attribute of strict judgment), but this is not the case with *midas harachamim* (the attribute of mercy) which necessarily must take precedence over *midas hadin* (the attribute of strict judgment), superseding it.

For example, if we say that the king did a *chesed* with a certain wealthy man, that, for example, he gave him 1000 silver pieces as a gift, we are able to understand this; but, if we say that the king had *rachamim* upon a certain wealthy man and gave him 1000 silver pieces, this doesn’t make sense because what sort of *rachamim* is there for a wealthy man when it comes to financial matters? *Rachamim* only applies in a case where, according to the strict letter of the law, one result would apply – for example, that a poor person is owed nothing by me – but that doesn’t stop me from having *rachamim* on him and giving him something to which he is not otherwise entitled.

Therefore, when the *Navi*, *Yirmiyahu*, saw with *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration) the tranquillity of the nation of Bavel (Babylonia), which was responsible for destroying *Bayis Rishon*, and the distress and suffering of Israel, he couldn’t imagine for himself that there would be a revival and rejuvenation for Israel because how could this small, poor, conquered and depressed people con-

tinue to exist among the many wolves of prey (ie. nations of the world), so he shouted, “My strength is lost...”¹⁵, “Recall my distress and my misery...”¹⁶.

But then he changes course and says, “This I call to mind, therefore I have hope”¹⁷ – what does the *Navi* call to mind that gives him hope? When he again considers the tranquillity of the nation of Bavel, and the tremendous *chesed* that flows to them from the Master of the World, from this he now takes strength and hope for the salvation of Israel, that Israel will not be destroyed by all of its suffering, because: “The *chesed* of Hashem has not ended.”¹⁸

In other words, if the *chesed* of Hashem has not come to an end for the nation of Bavel to whom, despite their wickedness, Hashem still gives them peace and tranquillity (He gives them a free gift which they are not owed, as with the gift of money given to the wealthy man), all the more so that Hashem doesn’t exhaust His *rachamim*, His ability to go beyond the strict letter of the law, for His nation Israel, who He certainly will not forsake and who only need His *rachamim* to save them from any harsh judgment.

ALL THE MORE SO FOR THOSE WHO DO HIS WILL

Our Sages were not pained by the tranquillity of the Romans, rather they were pained by the tremendous oppression and suffering that the Romans had caused Israel. When this incident with the noise of the Roman crowds described above took place, it was, in terms of time, relatively close to the destruction of *Bayis Sheini* (the Second Temple) and, like the *Navi*, our Sages found it difficult to imagine that there would be a restoration and revival of Israel – as many Jews likely felt after the Holocaust. Rabbi Akiva succeeded in comforting his colleagues by assuring them that, despite appearances, the eyes of Hashem were still on Israel and that Israel would not be destroyed, arguing that if Hashem showers so much *chesed* upon the Romans, who transgress His will as much as the Babylonians,

how much more so will He shower *rachamim* on His nation Israel that they should not be destroyed.

So, out of gratitude to Rabbi Akiva for inspiring hope for the Jewish people after the terrible events of the *churban* (the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem), therefore, all of these Sages travelled to his city and to his house – with the exception of Rabban Gamliel, because he was the *Nasi* – specifically to speak about the going out from Egypt on the night of the festival of Pesach because the story of the going out from Egypt makes clear the eternity of Israel, that everything was created for Israel and no one will succeed in destroying Israel. So too, the Haggadah is careful to note that they all spoke and elaborated on this subject until “their talmidim came and said, ‘our teachers, the time for the morning reading of the shema has arrived’” because the morning reading of the shema also serves as a source of strength, since, in the brachos after it, we say, “the Helper of our forefathers...Shield and Saviour for their children after them in every generation” and other similar things like this, in which we are promised by Hashem that the Jewish people will exist forever. ■

Based on *Leil Shimurim* and the *Mesivta Haggadah*

¹Sanhedrin 32b, 68a; Chagigah 3b; Beitza 5a

²Taanis 19a, 25b

³Sanhedrin 32b; Chagigah 3a

⁴Sanhedrin 32b

⁵Succah 27b

⁶Rosh Hashanah 31b

⁷See Yerushalmi Maaser Sheini 5:4; Tosafos Bava Metzria 11a d”h isur

⁸Shemos Rabbah 30:9; Devarim Rabbah 2:24

⁹Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 472:5

¹⁰Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 472:5

¹¹Rabbi Dovid Pardo, Chasdei Dovid

¹²Eiruvin 63a, d”h “Talmid Chaver”

¹³Zachor L’Avraham

¹⁴24a and b

¹⁵Eichah 3:18

¹⁶Eichah 3:19

¹⁷Eichah 3:21

¹⁸Eichah 3:22