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## SOURCES & RESOURCES

### RECONSTRUCTING THE FATE OF RABBI ELAZAR BEN ARAKH

How the mighty have fallen! Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, one of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's five main students, was lauded as "an ever stronger wellspring" (*Avot* 2:8), an image understood as representing exceptional creativity.<sup>1</sup> The Mishna even has an opinion that if his wisdom was weighed against that of his rabbinic colleagues combined, R. Elazar's could outweigh them all. Yet, his promising career seemed to come to an unfortunate end, as presented in three different sources, each with its own unique details.

*Shabbat* 147b

Once **R. Elazar ben Arakh happened** to come **there**, to Deyomset [an ancient spa town], and **he was drawn after them** [influenced negatively by the habits of the place], and **his Torah learning was forgotten**. When he returned, he stood to read from a Torah scroll and was supposed to read the verse: "This month shall be for you [*ha-hodesh*

<sup>1</sup> The introduction to Yitzchak Adler's *Lomdus: A Substructural Analysis of Conceptual Talmudic Thought* (New York, 1989), xvii, has a wider discussion of this Mishna. This understanding is generally accepted among more contemporary sources as well, such as Binyamin Lau, *Hakhamim*, vol. 2 (Yediot Sefraim, 2007), 46–52. Professor Itay Marienberg-Milikowsky, "Havey Gole le-Makom Torah," *JSIJ* 13 (2015), 1–24, argues that it means that R. Elazar taught a broad swath of the community. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 234–238, gives several compelling proofs for the classical understanding. Perhaps the strongest is *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* (chap. 2), which records a conversation between R. Yohanan ben Zakkai and R. Eliezer, where the former compares a cistern to a spring. The cistern cannot produce more water than was placed in it, but the spring can. The spring is meant as a parable to the ability to produce innovative Torah insights beyond what was revealed to Moshe.

*hazeh lakhem*]" (Exodus 12:2), but he had forgotten so much that he could barely remember how to read the Hebrew letters, and instead he read: **Have their hearts become deaf** [*ha-heresh haya libbam*, interchanging letters of similar appearance]. **The Sages prayed and asked for God to have mercy on him, and his learning was restored. And that is what we learned** in a mishna that **R. Nehorai says: Exile yourself to a place of Torah and do not say that it will follow you**, as if you are in a place of Torah, **your colleagues will establish it in your hands, and do not rely on your understanding alone. It was taught: R. Nehorai was not his name, but rather R. Nehemya was his name; and some say that R. Elazar ben Arakh was his name** and his statement was based on the personal experience of forgetting his Torah due to his failure to exile himself to a place of Torah. **And why was he called R. Nehorai?** It was **because he would illuminate** [*manhir*] **the eyes of the Sages in halakha.**

*Avot de-Rabi Natan* 14:6

He [R. Elazar ben Arakh] said, I will go to Deyomset [following the version of the Vilna Gaon], a fine place with fine and pleasant waters. And they [his fellow Sages] said let us go to Yavneh, to a place of many scholars who love the Torah. He, who went to Deyomset, a fine place with fine and pleasant waters, had his name diminished in Torah, while they that went to Yavneh, a place of many scholars who love the Torah, their names become great in Torah.

*Kohélet Rabba* 7:15

R. Yohanan ben Zakkai had five students. As long as he was alive, they stayed with him. When he died, they went to Yavneh. R. Elazar ben Arakh went with his wife to Amos, a place of fine water and a fine area. He waited for them to come to him and they did not come. Since they did not come to him, he wanted to go to them, but his wife would not let him. She said, "Who needs whom?" He said to her, "They need me." She said to him, "A vessel of food for rats, who comes to whom, the rats to the vessel or the vessel to the rats?" He listened to her and stayed there until he forgot his learning. After some time, they came to him and asked him: "Wheat bread or barley bread, which is better to eat?" And he did not know how to answer them.

Each version is presented on its own and, as such, can be understood on its own. However, taking a *sugya* approach to disparate aggadic passages, such as these, opens new vistas of interpretation. It is a given that the halakhic parts of the Talmud ought to be analyzed as a unified *sugya*,

taking parallel *gemarot* into account and considering the similarities and differences between them. Expanding that approach to other realms of Torah study can enrich one's appreciation of those areas. For example, looking at parallel topics in *Tanakh*, and what the *mefarshim* say across the board, often creates a whole greater than the sum of the parts. By the same token, a *sugya* approach to *aggada* can broaden the discussion and our understanding as well. In this case, that can be done on two levels. The first is culling the three narratives together into one richer and more compelling story.<sup>2</sup> Each version stands on its own, but is enhanced by details present only in the parallel accounts. The second is to view that narrative against the background of how R. Elazar ben Arakh is described elsewhere, in this case in the aforementioned *mishnayot* in *Avot*.

One could question both aspects of the *sugya* approach. If there are several accounts of a story in different corners of rabbinic literature, it is not clear they can or should be read together as parts of a whole. A dissenter could argue that each needs to stand and be understood on its own. The approach of analyzing statements or stories about someone based on that person's character traits is standard in universities as a methodology of explaining halakhic stances.<sup>3</sup> That approach is often speculative and understandably controversial, as it suggests that halakha developed based on the personalities of the deciders, rather than strictly based on the sources. The suggestion being raised here is to limit such an approach to *aggada*, where it would seem more straightforward that stories ascribed to a particular person are meant to take into account their known character traits.

Several contemporary thinkers have employed the *sugya* approach. For two examples: R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik connects R. Yohanan ben Zakkai's deathbed emotions in *Berakhot* 28b to his requests from Vespasian in *Gittin* 56a-b. He explains that Rabbi Yochanan's fear of how he would be judged in the afterlife was because he questioned himself if he should have asked for more from Vespasian, perhaps even sparing

<sup>2</sup> One downside to this approach is losing the opportunity to examine each *aggada* in its own context. In general, the degree that *aggadot* ought to be understood in context is subject to debate. See Yitzchak Blau's discussion of Yonah Fraenkel versus Jeffrey Rubenstein in "Hasidim and Academics Unite: The Significance of Aggadic Placement," *Conversations* 36 (Autumn 2020), 30–36.

<sup>3</sup> The aforementioned article by Marienberg-Milikowsky is a fine example of the academic approach to our topic. Rather than attempt to harmonize the different sources, as the *sugya* approach would suggest, he sees each as a variation of either a Babylonian or Palestinian tradition, and deals with variant texts of the Gemara, as well. However, as mentioned before, he arrives at a rather speculative conclusion.

Jerusalem from destruction altogether.<sup>4</sup> Yitzchak Blau contrasts Hillel's youthful arrogance in *Pesachim* 66a-b to his more measured persona in *Shabbat* 30b-31a, concluding that Hillel developed into a model of humility over time.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to our case, the narrative that emerges from combining the differing accounts is that R. Elazar ben Arakh chose to move to a materialistically enticing area, believing that his peers would follow suit.<sup>6</sup> When they did not, he felt that he did not need to join them, but rather expected them to come to him on account of his greater stature as a sage. The combination of living in such an environment and not having contemporaries to share in his learning caused him to forget his learning. He then needed those peers, whom his wife, and perhaps he, had previously denigrated, to pray for him to be restored to his former glory.

Assuming that the purpose of *aggada* is for the reader to glean a moral lesson, one can multiply such lessons from a composite reading of these texts. The challenge of choosing materialistic surroundings or one more conducive for a religious lifestyle is one that very much resonates with our modern society. *Hazal* expressed in other places, as well, that one ought to sacrifice on materialism in order to find the surroundings best suited to spiritual enhancement. For example, *Avot* 6:9 describes Rabbi Yose ben Kisma's emphatic rejection of an offer to leave a place of Torah learning for a significant monetary gain. Beyond the issue of picking the most ideal circumstance for one's spiritual development, given a choice, one could also consider to what degree an overly materialistic lifestyle will, in and of itself, prove detrimental.

Another important element is the need to have peers to challenge and enhance one's learning. Having others as a sounding board provides new insights and possibilities that one may not have considered. Beyond the benefit of exposure to other approaches, getting feedback allows people to realize the weakness of their arguments and when they might have been mistaken. When Rabbi Elazar's wife suggested that his peers needed him more than he needed them, it is not necessarily the case that she was mistaken, but rather that she was not taking into account how much any one person needs the intellectual company of peers. The Gemara often stresses the need for peers in one's learning. One of the clearest

<sup>4</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks* (Toras HoRav Foundation, 2002), 50–52.

<sup>5</sup> Yitzchak Blau, *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine* (Ktav, 2009), 235–236.

<sup>6</sup> This understanding of Deyomset is clear from the earlier context in *Shabbat*, and the environment's deleterious effect on the Ten Tribes; see Rashi, *ad loc.*

expressions of this is the position of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, coming on the heels of several statements to a similar effect, that “I learned much from my teachers, more from contemporaries, and from my students the most of all” (*Makkot* 10a; *Ta’anit* 7a).<sup>7</sup>

This last point dovetails nicely with the approach of seeing this story against the background of R. Elazar being described as particularly creative in *Avot*. Extremely creative thinkers are in danger of engaging in speculative and fanciful notions. Such thinkers might especially need peers to keep their ideas grounded. Having to review one’s thinking process and articulate it clearly grants an opportunity to reconsider one’s conclusions and whether those ideas are actually supported (or undermined) by the evidence.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps R. Elazar’s creativity was an additional impetus for him to believe that he could “do it alone.” As wonderful a gift as having a fertile imagination may be, it can lead to a degree of arrogance, in which one sees him or herself as being superior to those who are not as creative. This could lead one to feel that he does not need to waste time discussing his thoughts with those who are so much less innovative. The story is a stark reminder of how shortsighted such an approach ultimately is.

While R. Elazar is the main character in the story and, as such, his character tends to get the most attention, his peers are an integral part of the story as well. Even though R. Elazar made it clear that he felt like he did not need them, they still came to his aid in his time of need. When he forgot his learning, it was the formerly rejected peers who prayed for his learning to be restored. This is a valuable lesson about looking past slights and not abandoning people in their time of need.

Now, each source adds an element to the overall tapestry of the narrative. *Avot de-Rabi Natan* most poignantly presents the initial options of going with the other sages to Yavneh or choosing the more materialistically satisfying Deyomset. *Kohélet Rabba* presents R. Elazar ben Arakh’s later wavering in his decision and being convinced to remain isolated in place by his wife. *Shabbat* has the most graphic account of how severely his Torah knowledge had deteriorated and is the only version that has his peers pray for his learning to be restored. The background of R. Elazar

<sup>7</sup> Other sources that convey a similar idea are *Ta’anit* 23a (“*O havruta o mituta*”) and *Bava Metzia* 84a with R. Yohanan mourning the loss of Reish Lakish to challenge his ideas.

<sup>8</sup> Tashbetz, in his commentary *Magen Avot*, notes how, despite being such a major Torah figure as described in *Avot*, R. Elazar meets a bad end in the story in *Shabbat*. He does not, however, connect it to the specific trait of creativity.

ben Arakh being seen as uniquely creative, as recorded in *Avot*, is absent from any of those sources.

This illustration shows how taking a broader approach to *aggada* can open new areas of understanding.<sup>9</sup> This is true for looking at parallel accounts of the same story, comparing one text to another, or descriptions of characters who appear in the narrative and considering the perspective of different characters—in this case, both R. Elazar ben Arakh and his peers. By undertaking these methods of composite reading, the *sugya* approach to *aggada*, it is hoped that a richer analysis of these sources will become more normative in the world of the *beit midrash*.

<sup>9</sup> For some other examples of a *sugya* approach to *aggada*, see: Nahum Ish Gamzu's approach of "*gam zu le-tova*" from *Ta'anit* 21a compared and contrasted to R. Akiva's mantra of "whatever God does is for the best" in *Berakhot* 60b-61a. Particularly since *Hagiga* 12a establishes that R. Akiva was Nahum's student (at least in terms of certain hermeneutical methods). Likewise, R. Akiva's promise to someday buy his wife a precious piece of jewelry (the *Yerushalyim shel Zahav* in *Nedarim* 50a) can best be appreciated by reading that text together with its moving fulfillment in *Avot de-Rabi Natan* 6:2.