

Babylonian Talmud - Tractate Baba Metzia, page 59a-b

Mishna: Just as there is a prohibition of wronging in business transactions, so is there a prohibition of wronging with words. One should not say to another, “How much is this object?,” when he does not plan to buy it. If he was a penitent, one should not say to him, “Remember your former deeds!” If he descended from proselytes, one should not say to him, ‘remember the deeds of your forefathers,’ as it is written, “Do not wrong or oppress the proselyte (Exodus 22:20)”.

Gemara: ... It is better for a man to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to humiliate his fellow in public...

(A1) We learnt there: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: Rabbi Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean; and this was the oven of Akhnai (=snake).

(A2) Why [was it called the oven of] Akhnai? — Said Rav Yehudah in Shmuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed him with arguments as a snake, and proved it unclean.

(B1) It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every possible argument, but they did not accept them from him.

(B2) Said he to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!’ Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. ‘No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,’ they retorted. The carob tree returned to its place.

(B3) Again he said to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!’ Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — ‘No proof can be brought from a stream of water,’ they rejoined. The water returned to the proper direction.

(B4) Again he urged: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the study hall prove it,’ whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them, saying: ‘When scholars defeat each other in law, what is it for you?’

(B5) Hence they did not fall, in honour of Rabbi Yehoshua, nor did they stand again, in honour of Rabbi Eliezer; and they inclining and standing.

(C1) Again he said to them: 'If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proven from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'what is it for you with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in every place the halachah agrees with him!'

(C2) But Rabbi Yehoshua stood up on his feet and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven (Deuteronomy 30:12).'

(C3) What did he mean by this?

(C4) Said Rabbi Yermiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline (Exodus 23:2)'.
- - - - -

(D) Rabbi Natan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? — He laughed and smiled, he replied, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'

(E) It was said: On that day all holy things which Rabbi Eliezer had declared clean were brought and burnt in fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him.

(F1) Said they, 'Who shall go and inform him?' 'I will go,' answered Rabbi Akiva, 'lest an unsuitable person go and inform him, and thus destroy the whole world.' What did Rabbi Akiva do? He donned black garments and wrapped himself in black, and took off his shoes, and went and sat at a distance of four cubits from him and his eyes streamed with tears.

(F2) 'Akiva,' said Rabbi Eliezer to him, 'why are you acting differently today?' 'Master,' he replied, 'it seems to me that thy colleagues are keeping separate from thee.' His eyes too streamed with tears and he too rent his garments, put off his shoes, removed [his seat] and sat on the earth, whilst tears streamed from his eyes.

(G1) The world was then smitten: a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat, and a third of the barley crop.

(G2) Some say, even (af) the dough in women's hands swelled up.

(G3) A Tanna taught: So (af) great was the calamity that befell that day, that every place at which R. Eliezer cast his eyes was immediately burned up.

(H) Also (af) Raban Gamaliel was travelling in a ship, when a huge wave stood to drown him. 'It seems to me,' he reflected, 'that this is on account of none other but [R. Eliezer] the Son of Hyrcanus.' Thereupon he stood up on his feet and exclaimed, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Thou knowest full well that I have not acted for my honour, nor for the honour of my paternal house, but for Thine, so that arguments may not multiply in Israel! 'At that the raging sea subsided.

- - - - -

(I) Ima Shalom R. Eliezer's wife, was the sister of R. Gamaliel. From the time of this incident onwards she did not permit him to fall upon his face. Now a certain day happened to be the New Moon, and a poor man came and stood at the door, and she took out some bread to him. [On her return] she found him fallen on his face. ‘Stand up,’ she cried out to him, ‘thou hast slain my brother.’ In the meanwhile he shofar blast had gone out from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. ‘Whence dost thou know it?’ he questioned her. ‘I have this tradition from my father's house: All gates are locked, except for the gates of (verbal) wrongdoing.’

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, page 119a

The character of the Holy One is not like the character of humans; when a human being is defeated he becomes sad, but when the Holy One is defeated he rejoices.

Structure of the Passage in Baba Metzi'a

| | |
|--|---|
| (1) legal dispute 3 miracles God's intervention rejected By R. Yehoshua's principle (presented standing) | (3) 3 disasters God's intervention restrained by R. Gamaliel's principle (presented standing) |
| (2) Eliezar banned and informed R. Akiva's mediation Eliezer's reaction; sits, tears | (4) Ima Shalom's mediation Eliezer's reaction; fall, prayer R. Gamaliel's death |

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, page 3b

And he also took up the text and expounded: The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well planted are the words of masters of Assemblies, which are given from one Shepherd.

Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow in order to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life. But [should you think] that just as the goad is

movable so the words of the Torah are movable; therefore the text says: 'nails'.

But [should you think] that just as the nail diminishes and does not increase, so too the words of the Torah diminish and do not increase; therefore the text says: 'well planted'; just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of the Torah grow and increase.

'The masters of assemblies': these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

Should a man say: How in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: 'All of them are given from one Shepherd'. One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: 'And God spoke all these words'. Also do thou make thine ear like the hopper and get thee a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.

For further study see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories – Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture*, chapter 2