

The Most Important Talmudic Passages
Class 10 – Human Input into Torah and Multiple Truths
Melton Gesher at JCC, December 19, 2012
JSI at Beth Torah, December 20, 2012
Schultz Family Study Session, March 24, 2014
JSI at Adat Chaverim, March 25, 2014

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, page 29b

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing crowns to the letters. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Who stays Thy hand?' He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva ben Yosef by name, who will expound upon each and every tip [of the crowns] heaps and heaps of laws'. 'Lord of the Universe', said Moses; 'permit me to see him'. He replied, 'Turn thee round'.

Moses went and sat down behind eighteen rows. Not being able to follow their arguments his strength failed him, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied 'It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai', he was comforted.

Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is My decree'.

Then said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward'. 'Turn thee round', said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. 'Lord of the Universe', cried Moses, 'such Torah, and such a reward!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is My decree'.

Seder Eliyahu Zutta 2

"Once I was on a journey, and I came upon a man who went the way of heretics. He accepted the Written Torah but not the Oral Torah. He said to me: The Written Law was given to us from Mount Sinai; the Oral Law was not given from Mount Sinai. I said to him: But were not both the Written and the Oral Torah spoken by the Almighty? Then what difference is there between the Written and the Oral Torah? To what can this be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had two servants and loved them both with perfect love. And he gave them each a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The wise servant, what did he do? He took the flax and spun a cloth. Then he took the wheat and made flour. The flour he cleansed, ground, kneaded and baked and set it on top of the table. Then he spread the cloth over it and left it until the king would come. But the foolish servant did nothing at all. After some days the king returned from a journey, entered his house and said to them: My sons, bring me what I gave you. One servant

showed him the wheaten bread on the table with a cloth spread over it, and the other servant showed the wheat still in the box, with a bundle of flax upon it. Alas for his shame, alas for his disgrace!

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, pages 3a - 3b

Our Rabbis taught: Once Rebbi Yochanan ben. Beroka and Rebbi Eleazar ben Hisma went to pay their respects to Rebbi Yehoshua at Peki'in. Said he to them: What new teaching was there in the Beit Midrash today? They replied: We are your disciples and your waters do we drink. Said he to them: Even so, it is impossible for a session in the Beit Midrash to pass without some novel teaching. Whose Shabat was it? It was the Shabat of Rebbi Elazar ben Azariah, [they replied].- And what was the theme of his Haggadic discourse to-day? They answered: The parsha of Hakhel. And what exposition did he give thereon?

“Assemble the people the men and the women and the little ones” (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). If the men come to learn, and the women come to hear, why do the children come? In order to confer reward upon those who bring them.

He said to them, You had a precious pearl in your hand and you tried to deprive me of it!
...

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” (Kohélet 12:11).

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” (Exodus 20:1). Also do thou make your 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.

Rebbi Yehoshua addressed them in this way: It is no orphan generation within which Rebbi Elazar ben Azariah lives.

But they could have told him directly! It was on account of a certain occurrence [that they did not do so].

For it is taught: Once Rebbi Yose ben Durmaskit went to pay his respects to Rebbi Eliezer at Lod. Said the latter to him: What new teaching was there in the Beit Midrash today?

He replied: They decided by vote that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor should be given in the seventh year.

Said [Rebbi Eliezer] to him: Yose, stretch forth your hands and receive your eyes. He stretched forth his hands and received his eyes.

Rebbi Eliezer [then] wept and said: "The counsel of the Lord is with them that fear Him, to them He makes known His covenant". (Psalms 25:14) He [then] said to him: Go, say to them: No attention is to be paid to your vote, for thus have I received as a tradition from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who heard [it] from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, that it is a halachah of Moses from Sinai that in Ammon and Moab the tithe of the poor is to be given in the seventh year.

What is the reason [continued Rebbi Eleazar]? — Many cities were conquered by those who came up from Egypt, which were not conquered by those who came up from Babylon; since the first consecration held [only] for the time, but did not hold permanently, therefore they were left in order that the poor might be sustained upon them in the seventh year.

It is taught: When his mind was calmed, he said: May it be granted that Yose's sight be restored. And it was restored.

Rashi

"Make your ear like the hopper" – For since the hearts of all the disputants are prudently directed towards the heavens, therefore acquire an attentive ear, study (their words) and acquaint yourself with each of their (conflicting) opinions, and when you are capable of discerning which of them is best suited (to the situation at hand), declare the halacha to be as he says.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin, page 13b

Rebbi Abba stated in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and School of Hillel, the former asserting, 'The law is in agreement with our approach' and the latter contending, 'The law is in agreement with our approach'. Then the echo of a heavenly voice came forth announcing, 'Both these and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the approach of School of Hillel'.

Since, however, 'both these and those are the words of the living God' what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed in agreement with their approach? Because they were kindly and self effacing, they taught their own approach and that of the School of Shammai as well, and went even so far as to teach the approach of the School of Shammai before their own approach.

Supplementary Material

Stories of the Babylonian Talmud, Jeffrey Rubenstein, chapter 6, and chapter 9, especially pages 182 – 190, 201

Rationalist Rabbis, Menachem Fisch, pages 88 ff.