Koren Talmud Bavli

Bava Metzia

Part Two

Commentary by
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The Noé Edition
Shimon was such a brilliant scholar that his son, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi became offended. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi thought that the expertise of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, in Torah was a result of his greater effort, and that it upset him. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s father therefore explained to him that one’s eru-ption is not solely a result of his toil. In this case, Rabbi Shimon was such a brilliant scholar that his son, Rabbi Elazar, had inherited great intellectual acumen (M留言板्र 릭ఈ). As a result of that incident, the relationship of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, with Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi changed. Up until that day, when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would state a matter of Torah, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, would support him by citing proofs for his opinion. From this point forward, when they were discussing a subject and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would say: I have an argument to respond, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, would preempt him by saying to him: Such and such is what you have to respond, and this is the refutation of your claim. Now that you asked these questions, you have surrounded us with bundles of refutations that have no substance, i.e., you have forced us to give unnecessary answers. Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, would anticipate Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s comments and immediately dismiss them as having no value.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi became offended. He came and told his father what had transpired. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said to him: My son, do not let his actions offend you, as he is a lion, son of a lion, and you are a lion, son of a fox. Rabbi Elazar’s father, Rabbi Shimon, was a renowned Sage, and therefore Rabbi Elazar’s sagacity is not surprising. In any event, this incident demonstrates the superiority of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi with regard to knowledge of Torah.

The Gemara concludes: This incident is the background to a statement which Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: There are three prototypical modest people, and they are: Father, i.e., Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel; the sons of Beteira; and Jonathan, son of Saul. The Gemara discusses each case: The incident revealing the modesty of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is that which we just said, as he referred to himself modestly as a fox. The sons of Beteira were exceptionally modest, as they served in the position of Nasi and yet abdicated their positions in favor of Hillel when he emigrated from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael. As the Master said: The sons of Beteira, upon recognizing that Hillel was a superior expert in halakha, seated him at the head and appointed him Nasi over them (see Pesahim 66a). Jonathan, son of Saul, was extremely modest, as he said to David: “And you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you” (1 Samuel 23:17), despite the fact that his father, Saul, was the current king.

The Gemara asks: From where do we know that the aforementioned men were truly modest? Perhaps Jonathan, son of Saul, relinquished his rights to the kingship not due to modesty, but because he saw that the world, i.e., the masses, were drawn after David, and he felt he had no other recourse. With regard to the sons of Beteira also, perhaps they abdicated only because they saw that Hillel was greater than they, as he was able to answer questions that they could not resolve. The Gemara adds: But Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel certainly was a truly modest individual.

The Gemara returns to the previous incident. When he heard that the greatness of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was due to his suffering, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to himself: Afflictions are evidently precious. He accepted thirteen years of afflictions upon himself; six years of stones in the kidneys and seven years of scurvy [bittfarna]. And some say it was seven years of stones in the kidneys and six years of scurvy.

Scurvy [tzefarna] – The version of this term that appears in the Arukh, tzefarna, is probably the most accurate version of the text. According to the Talmud’s description of this disease in various places, it is apparently scurvy, a disease caused by vitamin C deficiency. Symptoms include general lethargy and loss of teeth (see Rashi).
The Gemara relates: The stableman [ahuriyarekh] of the house of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was wealthier than King Shapur of Persia, due to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s abundant livestock. When the stableman would place fodder before the livestock, the sound of their lowing would travel the distance of three mil. He would calculate the right moment so that he would place the fodder before the animals at precisely that time when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi entered the latrine, so that the lowing of the animals would drown out Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s screams of pain. But even so, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s voice was so loud that it overcame the sound of the livestock, and even sailors heard it out at sea.

The Gemara says: But even so, the afflictions of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, were greater than those of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. The reason is that whereas the afflictions of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came upon him out of love, and left him out of love, i.e., they were solely the result of his own request, not because he deserved them, those of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi came upon him due to an incident and left him due to another incident.

The Gemara stated that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s suffering came upon him due to an incident. What was that incident that led to his suffering? The Gemara answers that there was a certain calf that was being led to slaughter. The calf went and hung its head on the corner of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s garment and was weeping. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to it: Go, as you were created for this purpose.6 It was said in Heaven: Since he was not compassionate toward the calf, let afflictions come upon him.

The Gemara explains the statement: And left him due to another incident. One day, the maidservant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was sweeping his house. There were young weasels (karkushta) lying about, and she was in the process of sweeping them out. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to her: Let them be, as it is written: “The Lord is good to all; and His mercies are over all His works” (Psalms 145:9). They said in Heaven: Since he was compassionate, we shall be compassionate on him, and he was relieved of his suffering.

The Gemara relates: During all the years of the suffering of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, no one died prematurely,9 as his afflictions atoned for the entire generation. During all the years of the suffering of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the world did not require any rain, as the moisture of the dew was sufficient. As Rabba bar Rav Sheila said: A day of rain is as difficult as a day of judgment, due to the damage that storms and flooding can cause. And Ameimar said: Were it not for the fact that rain is needed by people, the Sages would pray for mercy and annul it, due to the nuisances of rain. And even so, despite the fact that there was no rain all those years, when a rain was unforthcoming from its row in the field, there remained in its place a hole filled with water, due to the moisture in the earth.

The Gemara continues discussing Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s relationship with Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon. Once Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi arrived at the place of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon. He said to the locals: Does that righteous person have a son? They said to him: He has a son who is wayward, and any prostitute who hires herself out to others for two coins hires him for eight, due to his handsomeness. Upon hearing this report, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi resolved to extricate Rabbi Elazar’s son from his plight. He brought him back with him, ordained him as a rabbi,8 and gave him over to Rabbi Shimon ben Isi ben Lakonya,10 the brother of the boy’s mother, to teach him Torah.
Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another – he is referred to as a yama. The Halakha explains that this is related to the Aramaic term yama, meaning to take an oath. The form mometi, meaning oath, is derived from the same root.

NOTES

That this one was greater than that one – בּוֹרֵא עָנָיו. It might have been thought that Rabbi Yosei was denied access to his father’s cave because he was a penitent and therefore of inferior status. The Divine Voice emerged in order to counter this misconception (Ein Yehoset).

Married her and divorced her – מַמַּא וְגֵירְשָׁהּ. The commentaries note that when Rabbi Yohanan offered Reish Lakish his sister in marriage provided that Reish Lakish repented (8a), Reish Lakish married her and did not voice the concern of Rabbi Tarfon’s grandson that people might think that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi thus has a son and that his son speaks in his mouth, so that a son may enter next to his father. The Gemara answers: A Divine Voice emerged and said: It is because of this Rabbi Yosei (proverbs 11:30). The Gemara explains, with regard to the phrase “the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,” this is referring to Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, who was the son of a righteous individual and became a great scholar in his own right. When the verse states: “And he that is wise wins souls,” this is referring to Rabbi Shimon ben Isi ben Lakanoya, who successfully helped Rabbi Yosei reach his potential.

Each day, the boy would say: I am going back to my town, because it was difficult for him to study. Rabbi Shimon ben Isi ben Lakanoya said to him: You have been made wise, and a golden cloak has been spread over you when you were ordained, and you are called by the title Rabbi, and yet you say: I am going back to my town? The boy said to him: I vow [mometi] that this thought of leaving is now abandoned, i.e., I will stay and improve my ways. When the boy matured and became a Torah scholar, he came and sat in the academy of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi heard his voice and said: This voice is similar to the voice of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon. Those who were present said to him: It is his son.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi read the verse about him: “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that is wise wins souls” (Proverbs 11:30). The Gemara explains, with regard to the phrase “the fruit of the righteous,” this is referring to Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, who was the son of a righteous individual and became a great scholar in his own right. When the verse states: “And he that is wise wins souls,” this is referring to Rabbi Shimon ben Isi ben Lakanoya, who successfully helped Rabbi Yosei reach his potential.

When this Rabbi Yosei died, he was brought to his father’s cave for burial. A serpent encircled the entrance of the cave, denying any access. Those present said to it: Serpent, serpent! Open your mouth, so that a son may enter next to his father. The serpent did not open its mouth for them. The people there thought that Rabbi Yosei was denied burial alongside his father because this one, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was greater than that one, Rabbi Yosei.

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A Divine Voice emerged and said: It is because this one is greater than that one; rather, it is because this one, Rabbi Elazar, experienced the suffering of the cave, while that one, i.e., Rabbi Yosei, did not experience suffering of the cave. Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, suffered with his father for thirteen years in a cave while hiding from the Romans (see Shabbat 33b).

The Gemara relates a similar incident: Once Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi arrived at the place of Rabbi Tarfon. He said to the townspeople: Does that righteous person, Rabbi Tarfon, who would take an oath by the life of his children, have a son? Rabbi Tarfon was wont to take oaths by the lives of his children (see Oholot 16:1). They said to him: He does not have a son, but he has a grandson, a son from his daughter, and every prostitute who is hired for two coins hires him for eight.

The townspeople brought Rabbi Tarfon’s grandson before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who said to him: If you repent from your evil ways, I will give you my daughter in marriage. He repented and became a righteous individual. There are those who say that he married Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s daughter and subsequently divorced her.

There are those who say that he did not marry her at all, so that it would not be said about him: It was for the sake of that woman that this man repented.

§ The Gemara asks: And why did Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi exert himself so much to save these wayward sons? The Gemara answers: It is because of that which Rav Yehuda says that Rav says, and some say that which Rabbi Hyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Yohanan says, and some say that which Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: Anyone who teaches Torah to the son of another merits to sit and study in the heavenly academy, as it is stated: “Therefore says the Lord: If you return, and I bring you back, you shall stand before Me” (Jeremiah 15:19). This verse, which is addressed to Jeremiah, indicates that if he is able to cause the Jewish people to return to God, he himself will be brought to stand before God.
Note: Even if the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to issue a decree He may nullify it, i.e., He may not impose any penalty for it if he is of the opinion that it is no decree at all, as it is stated in the continuation of the verse: “And if you bring forth the precious out of the worthless, you shall be as My mouth,” i.e., you will be like the mouth of God that can rescind a decree.

The Gemara relates other statements pertaining to Torah scholars and their descendants. Rabbi Parnakh says that Rabbi Yohanan says: With regard to anyone who is a Torah scholar, and whose son is a Torah scholar, and whose grandson is a Torah scholar, the Torah will never again cease from his descendants, as it is stated: “And as for Me, this is My covenant… My spirit that is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your seed, nor out of the mouth of your seed’s seed, says the Lord, from now and forever” (Isaiah 59:21).

The Gemara asks: What is the significance of the phrase “says the Lord”? The Gemara answers that the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “I am your guarantor in this matter. The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of the phrase “from now and forever”? The verse mentions only three generations. Rabbi Yirmeya says: The verse means that from this point forward, after three generations, the Torah returns to its lodging, i.e., the Torah is now ingrained in the family.

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Yosef fasted forty fasts so that the Torah would become ingrained in his family; and he was read the verse in a dream: “My words…shall not depart out of your mouth.” He fasted an additional forty fasts and he was read: “Shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your seed.” He fasted an additional one hundred fasts. In a dream, he came and was read the conclusion of the verse: “Shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your seed, nor out of the mouth of your seed’s seed.” He said: From this point forward I do not need to fast anymore, as I am now assured that the Torah will return to its lodging.

The Gemara relates a similar occurrence: When Rabbi Zeira ascended from Babylonia to Eretz Yisrael, he fasted one hundred fasts so that he would not forget the Babylonian method of studying Gemara, so that it would not hinder him from adapting to the unique style of study prevalent in Eretz Yisrael. He fasted an additional one hundred fasts so that Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, would not die during his lifetime, which would have caused the burden of communal matters to fall upon him. As dean of the Torah academy, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was in charge of all public affairs, leaving Rabbi Zeira unencumbered to study Torah. Rabbi Zeira fasted an additional one hundred fasts so that the fire of Gehenna should not affect him.

The Gemara relates with regard to Rabbi Zeira: Every thirty days, he would examine himself to ascertain if he remained on his exalted level. He would ignite an oven, climb in, and sit inside it, and the fire would not affect him. One day, the Sages gave him the evil eye, i.e., they were envious of him, and his legs became singed in the fire. And from then on they referred to him as: The short one with singed legs.

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The Gemara discusses the topic of the acquisition of Torah knowledge. Rav Yehuda says in his name: “My father instructed me that my father told me to study Torah every day.” If not, my father would not have instructed me.”

Rav Yosef – son of Rabbi Shimon, was one of the greatest of the third-generation Babylonian tannaim. He was a disciple of Rav Yehuda and a colleague of Rabbi, and he headed the Pumbedita academy for two and a half years. Rav Yosef was called Sinai due to his expert knowledge of baraitot and the oral traditions of the Torah, as well as its translation. His primary students were Abaye and Rava. An illness caused him to forget all his studies, but Abaye helped him to remember them. Rav Yosef also grew blind. After his death, Rav Yosef was succeeded by Abaye as head of the Pumbedita academy.

Rabbi Zeira – son of Rabbi Shimon, was one of the greatest of the third-generation amoraim. His father, a Persian government tax collector, was praised as one of the few who performed that function honestly. When Rabbi Zeira ascended to Eretz Yisrael, he decided to identify himself entirely with the Torah of Eretz Yisrael. As stated here, he undertook one hundred fasts to forget the Torah he studied in Babylonia.

Rabbi Zeira was renowned for his sharp intellect, and he related many incisive halakhot. He was also known as an extremely God-fearing man, as attested by several stories. Due to his modesty, he did not even wish to be ordained with the title Rabbi. He relented only after being told that ordination atones for one’s sins.

Rabbi Zeira was a contemporary of Rav Hisdai, Rav Sheheta, and Rabbi in Babylonia, and of the disciples of Rabbi Yohanan in Eretz Yisrael, with whom he engaged in extensive halakhic discourse. Apparently, he was a flux merchant in Eretz Yisrael, and it is likely that for business reasons he returned to Babylonia several times.

The text of the beginning of Rabbi Zeira’s eulogy is preserved in the Talmud as follows: The land of Shinar, i.e., Babylonia, conceived and gave birth; the land of splendid, i.e., Eretz Yisrael, raised her delight. Woe to me, said Reket, i.e., Tiberias, as she has lost her beloved instrument (Moed Katan 25b). Rabbi Zeira’s son, Rabbi Ahava, was a Sage in the following generation.