

Transitions in Rabbinic Leadership

A Talmudic Tale

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ברכות כ"ז ב

אָמְרִי: עַד כַּמָּה נִצְעָרִיה וְנִיזִיל, בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה אֲשַׁתְּקֵד צְעָרִיה. בְּכֹוֹרוֹת בְּמַעֲשֵׂה דְרַבִּי צְדוֹק צְעָרִיה. הֲכָא נָמִי צְעָרִיה, תָּא וְנַעֲבְרִיה! מֵאֵן נוֹקִים לִיה? נוֹקְמִיה לְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ — בְּעַל מַעֲשֵׂה הוּא. נוֹקְמִיה לְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא — דִּילְמָא עֲנִישׁ לִיה, דְּלִית לִיה זְכוּת אָבוֹת. אֲלֵא נוֹקְמִיה לְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה, דְּהוּא חָכָם, וְהוּא עֲשִׂיר, וְהוּא עֲשִׂירִי לְעִזְרָא. הוּא חָכָם — דָּאִי מְקַשִּׁי לִיה, מְפָרַק לִיה. וְהוּא עֲשִׂיר — דָּאִי אֵית לִיה לְפִלּוּחֵי לְבֵי קִיסָר, אָף הוּא אָזֵל וּפְלַח. וְהוּא עֲשִׂירִי לְעִזְרָא — דָּאִית לִיה זְכוּת אָבוֹת, וְלֵא מְצִי עֲנִישׁ לִיה. אַתּוּ וְאַמְרוּ לִיה: נִיחָא לִיה לְמַר דְּלִיהוּי רִישׁ מְתִיבְתָא? אָמַר לְהוּ: אִיזִיל וְאִימְלִיד בְּאִינְשֵׁי בֵיתִי. אָזֵל וְאִמְלִיד בְּדַבְּתָהּ. אָמַרָה לִיה:

Berakhot 27b

They said: How long will Rabban Gamliel continue afflicting him? Last year on Rosh HaShana, he afflicted him; Rabban Gamliel ordered Rabbi Yehoshua to come to him carrying his staff and bag, on the day on which Yom Kippur occurred, according to Rabbi Yehoshua's calculations. **Regarding the firstborn, in the incident** involving the question of **Rabbi Tzadok, he afflicted him** just as he did now, and forced him to remain standing as punishment for his failure to defend his differing opinion. **Here too, he is afflicting him.**

Let us remove him from his position as *Nasi*. It was so agreed, but the question arose: **Who shall we establish** in his place? Shall we **establish Rabbi Yehoshua** in his place? The Sages rejected that option because Rabbi Yehoshua **was party to the incident** for which Rabban Gamliel was deposed. Appointing him would be extremely upsetting for Rabban Gamliel. Shall we **establish Rabbi Akiva** in his place? The Sages rejected that option because Rabbi Akiva, who descended from a family of converts, would be vulnerable. **Perhaps** due to Rabban Gamliel's resentment he **would** cause **him** to be divinely **punished as he lacks the merit of his ancestors** to protect him. **Rather**, suggested the Sages, **let us establish Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya** in his place, his outstanding characteristics set him apart from the other candidates. **He is wise, rich, and a tenth generation descendant of Ezra**. The Gemara explains: **He is wise, so if Rabban Gamliel raises a challenge** in matters of Torah, **he will answer it** and not be embarrassed. **And he is rich, so if the need arises to pay homage to the Caesar's court** and serve as a representative of Israel to lobby and negotiate, he has sufficient wealth to cover the costs of the long journeys, taxes, and gifts, so **he too is able to go and pay homage**. **And he is a tenth generation descendant of Ezra, so he has the merit of his ancestors, and Rabban Gamliel will be unable to cause him to be punished.**

**They came and said to him: Would the Master consent to being the Head of the Yeshiva?
He said to them: I will go and consult with my household.**

He went and consulted with his wife. She said to him:

ברכות כ"ח א

דלמא מעברין לה. אמר לה: לשתמש אינש יומא חדא בכסא דמוקרא, ולמחר ליתבר. אמרה ליה: לית לה חיותא. ההוא יומא בר תמני סרי שני הוה, אתרחיש ליה ניסא ואהדרו ליה תמני סרי דרי חיותא. היינו דקאמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: הרי אני כבן שבעים שנה. ולא "בן שבעים שנה". תנא אותו היום, סלקוהו לשומר הפתח ונתנה להם רשות לתלמידים ליכנס. שהיה רבן גמליאל מכריז ואומר: כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כפרו, לא יכנס לבית המדרש. ההוא יומא אתוספו כמה ספסלי. אמר רבי יוחנן: פליגי בה אבא יוסף בן דוסתאי ורבנן. חד אמר: אתוספו ארבע מאה ספסלי. וחד אמר: שבע מאה ספסלי. הוה קא חלשה דעתיה דרבן גמליאל, אמר: דלמא חס ושלום מנעתי תורה מישראל. אחזו ליה בחלמיה חצבי חיורי דמליין קטמא. ולא היא, ההיא ליתובי דעתיה, הוא דאחזו ליה. תנא: עדיות בו ביום נשנית. וכל היכא דאמרינן "בו ביום", ההוא יומא הוה. ולא היתה הלכה שהיתה תלויה בבית המדרש שלא פירשוהו. ואף רבן גמליאל לא מנע עצמו מבית המדרש אפילו שעה אחת. דתנן: בו ביום בא יהודה גר עמוני לפניהם בבית המדרש. אמר להם: מה אני לבא בקהל? אמר לו רבן גמליאל: אסור אתה לבא בקהל. אמר לו רבי יהושע: מותר אתה לבא בקהל. אמר לו רבן גמליאל: והלא כבר נאמר "לא יבא עמוני ומואבי בקהל ה'?" אמר לו רבי יהושע: וכי עמון ומואב במקומן הן יושבין? כבר עלה סנחריב מלך אשור ובלבל את כל האומות, שנאמר: "ואסיר גבולות עמים ועתודותיהם שושתי ואוריד כביר יושבים", וכך דפריש — מרובא פריש. אמר לו רבן גמליאל: והלא כבר נאמר "ואחרי כן אשיב את שבות בני עמון נאם ה'", וכבר שבו! אמר לו רבי יהושע: והלא כבר נאמר "ושבתי את שבות עמי ישראל", ועדיין לא שבו. מיד התירוהו לבא בקהל. אמר רבן גמליאל: הואיל והכי הוה, איזיל ואפיסייה לרבי יהושע. כי מטא לביתה, חזינהו לאשיתא דביתה דמשחרו. אמר ליה: מכותלי ביתך אתה ניכר שפחמי אתה. אמר לו: אוי לו לדור שאתה פרנסו, שאי אתה יודע בצערן של תלמידי חכמים, במה הם מתפרנסים ובמה הם נזונים. אמר לו: נעניתי לה מחול לי. לא אשגח ביה: עשה בשביל כבוד אבא. פייס. אמרו: מאן גיזיל ולימא להו לרבנן. אמר להו ההוא כובס: אנא אזילנא. שלח להו רבי יהושע לבי מדרשא: מאן דלביש מדא — ילבש מדא, ומאן דלא לביש מדא ימר ליה למאן דלביש מדא: שלח מדך ואנא אלבשיה!? אמר להו רבי עקיבא לרבנן: טרוקו גלי דלא ליתו עבדי דרבן גמליאל ולצערו לרבנן. אמר רבי יהושע: מוטב דאיקום ואיזיל אנא לגבייהו. אתא טרף אבבא. אמר להו: מזה בן מזה יזה. ושאינו לא מזה ולא בן מזה יאמר למזה בן מזה מימיה מי מערה ואפרך אפר מקלה. אמר לו רבי עקיבא: רבי יהושע, נתפייסת? כלום עשינו אלא בשביל כבודך, למחר אני ואתה נשכים לפתחו. אמרי:

היכי נעביד, נעבדיה — גמירי מעלין בקדוש ואין מורדין. נדרוש מר קדא שבתא ומר קדא שבתא — אתי לקנאווי. אלא: לדרוש רבן גמליאל תלתא שבתי ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה קדא שבתא. והיינו דאמר מר שבת של מי היתה — של רבי אלעזר בן עזריה היתה. ואותו תלמיד רבי שמעון בן יוחאי הוה.

Berakhot 28a

Perhaps they will remove you from office just as they removed Rabban Gamliel. He said to her, based on the folk saying: **Let a person use an expensive goblet one day and let it break tomorrow. She said to him: You have no white hair**, and it is inappropriate for one so young to head the Sages. The Gemara relates: **That day, he was eighteen years old, a miracle transpired for him and eighteen rows of hair turned white.** The Gemara comments: **That explains that which Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said: I am as one who is seventy years old and he did not say: I am seventy years old**, because he looked older than he actually was.

It was taught: On that day that they removed Rabban Gamliel from his position and appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya in his place, there was also a fundamental change in the general approach of the study hall as **they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter.**

As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose inside, his thoughts and feelings, **are not like his outside**, i.e., his conduct and his character traits are lacking, **will not enter the study hall.**

The Gemara relates: **On that day several benches were added** to the study hall to accommodate the numerous students. **Rabbi Yohanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this matter. One said: Four hundred benches were added** to the study hall. **And one said: Seven hundred benches were added** to the study hall.

When he saw the tremendous growth in the number of students, **Rabban Gamliel was disheartened. He said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I prevented Israel from engaging in Torah study.**

It was taught: There is a tradition that tractate *Eduyyot* was taught that day. **And everywhere** in the Mishna or in a *baraita* that they say: **On that day, it is referring to that day. There was no halakha whose ruling was pending in the study hall that they did not explain** and arrive at a practical halakhic conclusion. **And even Rabban Gamliel did not avoid the study hall for even one moment,**

As we learned in a mishna: **On that day, Yehuda, the Ammonite convert, came before** the students in the study hall **and he said to them: What is my legal status in terms of entering into the congregation** of Israel, i.e., to marry a Jewish woman? **Rabban Gamliel said to him: You are forbidden to enter into the congregation. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: You are permitted to enter into the congregation. Rabban Gamliel said to Rabbi Yehoshua: Wasn't it already stated: "An Ammonite and a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the congregation of the Lord forever"** (Deuteronomy 23:4)? How can you permit him to enter the congregation? **Rabbi Yehoshua said to Rabban Gamliel: Do Ammon and Moab reside in their place? Sennacherib already came and**, through his policy of population transfer,

scrambled all the nations and settled other nations in place of Ammon. Consequently, the current residents of Ammon and Moab are not ethnic Ammonites and Moabites, **as it is stated in** reference to Sennacherib: **“I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and have brought down as one mighty the inhabitants”** (Isaiah 10:13). **And** although it is conceivable that this particular convert is an ethnic Ammonite, nevertheless, there is no need for concern due to the halakhic principle: **Anything that parts from a group parts from the majority**, and the assumption is that he is from the majority of nations whose members are permitted to enter the congregation. **Rabban Gamliel said to Rabbi Yehoshua: But wasn't it already stated: “But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon, says the Lord”** (Jeremiah 49:6) **and they have already returned** to their land? Therefore, he is an ethnic Ammonite and he may not convert. **Rabbi Yehoshua said to Rabban Gamliel:** That is no proof. **Wasn't it already stated** in another prophecy: **“And I will turn the captivity of My people Israel** and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them” (Amos 9:14), **and they have not yet returned?** In rendering the ruling, only proven facts may be taken into consideration. **They immediately permitted him to enter the congregation.** This proves that Rabban Gamliel did not absent himself from the study hall that day and participated in the halakhic discourse. **Rabban Gamliel said to himself: Since this is** the situation, that the people are following Rabbi Yehoshua, apparently he was right.

Therefore, it would be appropriate for me to **go and appease Rabbi Yehoshua. When he reached** Rabbi Yehoshua's **house, he saw** that **the walls of his house were black.** Rabban Gamliel **said to** Rabbi Yehoshua in wonderment: **From the walls of your house it is apparent that you are a blacksmith,** as until then he had no idea that Rabbi Yehoshua was forced to engage in that arduous trade in order to make a living. Rabbi Yehoshua **said to him: Woe unto a generation that you are its leader as you are unaware of the difficulties of Torah scholars, how they make a living and how they feed themselves.** Rabban Gamliel **said to him: I insulted you, forgive me.** Rabbi Yehoshua **paid him no attention** and did not forgive him. He asked him again: **Do it in deference to my father,** Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who was one of the leaders of Israel at the time of the destruction of the Temple. **He was appeased.** Now that Rabbi Yehoshua was no longer offended, it was only natural that Rabban Gamliel would be restored to his position. **They said: Who will go and inform the Sages?** Apparently, they were not eager to carry out the mission that would undo the previous actions and remove Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya from his position as *Nasi*.

