

מעשה

ONCE,

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua
and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria
and Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon
reclined [for the seder] in Benei Brak.

EXPANSIONS

not brought our fathers out of Egypt – then we, and our children, and the children of our children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. The Exodus was not an isolated event, affecting only a portion of the nation of Israel, with no more than passing historical significance. It is the very source of the existence of the people of Israel as a nation, and had it not transpired, this people would have

prominence in the following generation had been his students, but a singular bond of affection existed between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva. It was R. Akiva whom R. Eliezer chose to teach the secrets of the Torah, because the latter deemed him alone worthy of receiving these mysteries.

R. Eliezer's son Hyrcanus was also considered one of the great sages of his generation.

Rabbi Akiva R. Akiva is considered one of Israel's greatest scholars of all time, and the pillar of the tannaitic era (first–second century CE). He was born in the time of the Second Temple and was executed following Bar Kokhba's unsuccessful rebellion against Rome.

Akiva b. Yosef was the offspring of a poor, ignoble family, a family of converts. His early life was marked by such ignorance that he did not even know the alphabet until an advanced age.

When he was already a widower and a father, he met Rachel, the daughter of his employer. She perceived his inner character and promised to marry him if he would engage in Torah study. Abiding a life of extreme poverty and toil, R. Akiva began to study Torah, advancing to the level in which he could be accepted as a student of the leading sages in the post-destruction era – R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. His teachers succeeded in revealing his great inner spiritual strengths, and in due time his relationship with these great men developed into that of a "student-colleague." Ultimately, R. Akiva became the *rosh yeshiva* of a great yeshiva in the city of Benei Brak, attracting thousands of students. Following the death of his teachers, R. Akiva was universally recognized as the foremost leader of his generation in every aspect of Judaism.

R. Akiva was one of Bar Kokhba's most ardent supporters; indeed, it was

מעשה

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ

וְרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה

וְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְרַבִּי טַרְפוֹן

שֶׁהָיוּ מְסֻבִּין בְּבֵית בְּרַק

EXPANSIONS

From this point on, the Haggada explains the importance of retelling the story of the Exodus, informing us that these questions and answers are not merely the account of some event from the distant past. Rather, there is an intrinsic necessity to review and remember the Exodus, to re-examine the events afresh in every generation. The first answer provided is that if the Holy One, blessed be He, had

Rabbi Eliezer This is R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, who in his own lifetime was already known as "Rabbi Eliezer the Great." He was one of the greatest sages of the Mishna, in the generation following the Destruction of the Second Temple.

R. Eliezer was the scion of a very wealthy, aristocratic family; some say that his lineage could be traced all the way back to Moses. However, his family did not allow him to pursue his Torah studies as he wished. It was only at an advanced age that R. Eliezer succeeded in escaping from his home, and in the midst of great physical deprivation, began studying with R. Yohanan b. Zakkai.

R. Eliezer was unusually intelligent, and his phenomenal memory became legendary (his teacher dubbed him "a cemented cistern that does not lose a single drop"). These factors caused him to rise in prominence within a short time and become one of the most important sages. Indeed,

one text states that on a scale, R. Eliezer "is the equivalent weight of all the sages of Israel." Because of his learning and lineage, he married the sister of the *nasi* (president) of the Sanhedrin, Rabban Gamliel of Yavne. R. Eliezer and his colleague and opponent R. Yehoshua were the main spokesmen in the succeeding generation. Although he received his instruction from the sages of the school of Hillel, R. Eliezer was personally more inclined in thought toward the opinions of the school of Shammai. Furthermore, he did not accept upon himself the decision of majority rule, and the situation deteriorated until the sages of the Sanhedrin were compelled to excommunicate him. This action, however, had no effect on the feelings of esteem and respect in which he was universally held. He was still viewed as a great luminary for all of Israel, and a personification of the Torah, by dint of his wisdom, righteousness, and personality. In reality, all of the sages who rose to

And they told of the Exodus from Egypt all that night;
until their students came in and said,
“Teachers –
the time for saying the *Shema* of the morning has come.”

EXPANSIONS

more one tells of the coming out of Egypt, the more admirable it is since he fulfills the commandment of remembering the Exodus in the most perfect manner. And as proof that even the greatest sages of the generation must also fulfill this commandment, an incident is recorded concerning five of the greatest scholars in Israel **who reclined [for the seder] in Benei Brak** where R. Akiva's beit midrash

representative of the Jewish people in matters of vital national interest. R. Yehoshua was a blacksmith by trade, and all his life he struggled to make a living. Despite this, he was always in good cheer, and his adages bespeak a gentle humor and a love for all of God's creatures. Almost all of the scholars in the next generation were either his students or his colleagues.

Rabbi Tarfon R. Tarfon was of priestly descent, and served in the Holy Temple at the close of the Second Temple era. However, the main period of his activity was in the years following the Temple's destruction, and to a large extent, in the proximity of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. R. Tarfon was wealthy and extremely generous, as well as somewhat eccentric. His unusual approach to various matters caused him to become involved in numerous adventures; moreover, over the years some of his personal expressions became accepted as standard forms of speech. Apparently, R. Tarfon was one of the first to recognize R. Akiva's greatness. Although he was initially wiser than R. Akiva and perhaps older as well, R. Tarfon deferred to R. Akiva, considering himself R. Akiva's student.

R. Tarfon also raised numerous students, including the great sage R. Yehuda b. Ilai. Likewise, R. Tarfon's grandson became a great Torah scholar during the time of R. Yehuda HaNasi.

Benei Brak This city is mentioned in Joshua 19:45 as one of the cities of the tribe of Dan, and it was almost certainly situated not far from the location of present-day Benei Brak.

Nothing is known of the city from the biblical period, but it seems that in the mishnaic era the city developed into an important center. Once R. Akiva established his yeshiva there, it gained special prominence, as illustrated by the Talmud's comments on the verse, "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20) – "this means one should follow the sages to their yeshivas...follow R. Akiva to Benei Brak" (Sanhedrin 32b).

It certainly appears that R. Akiva hosted this famed Passover meal, with the great sages of Israel in attendance.

They Told of the Exodus from Egypt Hasidic literature explains that the word *mesaper* ("tell") is related to *sapir*,

וְהָיוּ מְסֻפְּרִים בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם כָּל אוֹתוֹ הַלַּיְלָה
 עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ תַלְמִידֵיהֶם וְאָמְרוּ לָהֶם
 רְבוּתֵינוּ, הִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע שֶׁל שַׁחֲרִית.

EXPANSIONS

remained in Egypt forever as a tribe of slaves. Therefore **even were we all wise**, if every seder participant is a Torah scholar, **all intelligent, all aged**, having already heard the story of the Haggada many times before, **and all knowledgeable in the Torah** and what is written in it regarding this matter, **still the command would be upon us to tell of the coming out of Egypt**, to discuss it and review it. **And the**

apparently he who bestowed this sobriquet on the heroic rebel. R. Akiva believed that Bar Kokhba was none other than the Messiah, and it would appear that most of his students were killed during the rebellion. After this failure, R. Akiva unabashedly continued to teach Torah publicly. For this crime he was caught and imprisoned by the Roman authorities and executed in a most brutal and torturous manner, while all throughout the torment he recited the *Shema*. Although most of his students had been killed, those who did survive became the major leaders and sages of the next generation. For this reason, almost all of the mishnaic literature (and subsequently the talmudic literature as well) is based upon the pedagogic styles and analytical methodology that R. Akiva expounded and taught.

Just as he excelled in his knowledge of the "revealed" aspects of the Torah, so too, R. Akiva was a master of the hidden secrets of Torah wisdom. He was among the scholars who "rode in the chariot," meaning that he successfully navigated through the "orchard" of the Torah's mysteries, entering and leaving unharmed. Despite the many hardships he endured,

R. Akiva enjoyed great longevity, and according to tradition he was 120 at the time of his execution.

R. Akiva had a number of sons who also became Torah scholars, but it would seem that most of them died during his lifetime. It may be that only his son R. Yehoshua survived him.

To this day, R. Akiva's scholarship in every area of wisdom remains one of the central foundations of the entire Torah.

Rabbi Yehoshua This is R. Yehoshua b. Hanania HaLevi, one of the great *Tanna'im* of the generation following the Destruction of the Second Temple. R. Yehoshua was the most prominent student of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai. In addition to his greatness in Torah scholarship – he was so accomplished that the halakha follows his opinion even when the majority disagreed with him – he was famed as being one of the most brilliant men of his day. It is known that physically, he was exceedingly un-attractive; nonetheless he succeeded in mesmerizing not only his contemporaries and friends, but also the family of the Roman emperor Hadrian. He traveled to Rome several times to serve as the

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said:
 I am almost seventy years old,
 and never have I merited to find the command
 to speak of the Exodus from Egypt at night –
 until Ben Zoma interpreted:
 It is written,

EXPANSIONS

(and already considered among the greatest of the sages even while still a youth) **and never have I merited** (meaning, I did not succeed in bringing satisfactory evidence to substantiate my opinion that) **to find the command to speak of the Exodus from Egypt** in the *Shema* **at night**, on ordinary nights throughout the year, until the sage Shimon ben Zoma proved it through biblical exegesis of this verse: “**So that you remember the day of your Exodus from Egypt all the days of your life**” (Deut. 16:3). Ben Zoma explained that the expression “**the days of**

never quarreled with or set himself above others. Indeed, he always endeavored to continue his Torah studies and to learn from anyone who might have knowledge to impart, young and old alike. It appears that R. Elazar lived to be more than seventy. We have no record of his direct descendants, but we do know that he left a family that included numerous Torah scholars for many years to come.

To Speak of the Exodus from Egypt at Night The reason that it was not customary to mention the Exodus at night is that within the passages of the *Shema*, the Exodus is only mentioned in

connection to the commandment of tzitzit. But since the commandment of tzitzit is only fulfilled during the day, this paragraph was not included in the evening recitation of the *Shema* (although the concept of the Exodus is mentioned elsewhere in the Maariv service, in the blessing following the *Shema*). This halakhic debate whether to recite the passage of the tzitzit at night was never completely resolved. But in practice it has become the universally accepted custom to include this passage, and with it the mention of the Exodus, in both the morning and evening recitations of the *Shema*.

ברכות יב:

אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה
 הָרִי אֲנִי בֶּבֶן שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה
 וְלֹא זָכִיתִי שֶׁתֵּאמֹר יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלוֹת
 עַד שֶׁדָּרְשָׁה בֶּן זֹמָא
 שְׁנֵאמַר

EXPANSIONS

was located. There, **they told of the Exodus from Egypt** and expounded their own interpretations and expositions **all that night**. They expounded so deeply, and protracted the evening to such an extent that finally **their students came in and said**: “Teachers – the time for saying the *Shema* of the morning has come.”

Another confirmation of the extent of the obligation to retell the story of the Exodus – especially on the night of Passover – is cited from the Mishna (Tractate Berakhot 1:5): **Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said: I am almost seventy years old**

the sapphire, a bright precious stone. This signifies that the words of these sages served to illuminate not only the Torah's hidden mysteries, but also the night itself. As a result, they were unaware that the morning had arrived.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria R. Elazar b. Azaria was one of the youngest of the prominent sages after the Second Temple was destroyed, and one of the principle figures at the yeshiva in Yavne. He was a member of a distinguished and extremely affluent priestly family – descended from Ezra. While still a youth, he was considered one of

the outstanding scholars of the generation. When the *nasi* of the Sanhedrin, Rabban Gamliel, was deposed, R. Elazar b. Azaria was chosen as his replacement in spite of his youth. Even after Rabban Gamliel had been reinstated to his former position, R. Elazar still remained in office. R. Elazar was also renowned for his mastery of halakha, and even more so, as one of the foremost Torah expositors of his day. His important discourses were even recited in the presence of his teachers and met with universal admiration and honor.

Even though R. Elazar b. Azaria rose to a high level of official prominence, he