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The Oven of Akhnai: A Perplexing Tale About Humiliating Others

Every year I share a story on Erev Rosh Hashanah. Tonight, I'd like to share a classic story from the Talmud, known as the Oven of Akhnai.

We need to go back to the early second century. The Romans had destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple just decades before. Chaos is everywhere. Revolution is in the air. The Jewish community is divided into bitter factions, denouncing one another as traitors.

The great rabbis of the time had reestablished their academy at Yavneh and reconstituted the Sanhedrin, the official council where matters of great importance are debated.

An important issue has come before them – there is a new type of oven. Is it ritually pure or is it impure? Kosher, or not kosher?

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus, a sort of elder statesman, knows that he is correct in the matter. He stands up and declares, "Kosher! The oven is ritually pure!"

The other rabbis, under the strong leadership of Rabban Gamaliel, know that they are correct in the matter. They retort, "You are wrong! Not kosher!"

(And you thought you'd get a simple story with good guys and bad guys...)

Rabbi Eliezer presents legal arguments as to why the oven is kosher. He sees he is not convincing them. His arguments aren't compelling enough. He realizes that he needs something more. He shouts, "If the law is in accordance with my opinion, this carob tree will prove it!"

A shocking thing happens. The carob tree leaps from the ground and moves 100 cubits away. But the other rabbis shake their heads. "A carob tree offers no proof in a debate over law," they scold.

So Rabbi Eliezer tries something else. "Fine. If the law is in accordance with my opinion, the stream will prove it!"

And amazingly, the stream begins to flow backwards. But again, the other rabbis counter that you can't cite a stream as proof in matters of law.

Now Rabbi Eliezer is really frustrated. He won't acquiesce. He won't recognize his defeat in the argument. With spite he cries out, "If the law is in accordance with my opinion, the walls of the study hall will prove it."

And indeed, the walls of the academy begin to fall.

But then Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah leaps up and reprimands the walls for interfering in a debate among scholars.

Out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, the walls freeze and do not continue to fall. But out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer, they do not return to their original places. To this very day they remain leaning.

Now Rabbi Eliezer is boiling with rage, for nothing – not his stature, not his reasoning, not his miracles – is getting him anywhere. So he invokes the highest authority: “If the law is in accordance with my opinion, Heaven will prove it.”

There is silence.

And then, straight up from heaven a *bat kol*, a voice, is heard throughout the room: “Why are you differing with Rabbi Eliezer? The law is in accordance with his opinion in every place that he expresses an opinion. He is correct.”

How dare God interfere in the debate! Rabbi Yehoshua is furious. He responds, “*Lo bashamayim hee!* The Torah is not in heaven.”

You see, the Torah may be a sacred text, but God has already given it to us at Mt. Sinai, along with the power and authority to interpret it for ourselves. God is no longer revealed in miracles and voices, but in human reasoning and interpretation, in human debate and the hard work of reaching consensus.

“We go with majority rule,” Rabbi Yehoshua says. “We pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice.”

What does God say when faced with the charge that the Torah is not in heaven, that God must recuse Godself from this important matter at hand?

It is the prophet Elijah who answers this question. He tells Rabbi Natan that upon hearing Rabbi Yehoshua, God smiles.

Yes, God smiles and declares, “My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!”

Now if only the story ended here. We’d have this lovely text – from the Talmud no less – that argues that we, mere humans, have great responsibility for interpreting the sacred texts of Torah. That we can create a Judaism that is meaningful in our own lives, in our own community, and in our own generation. And we could call it a day.

But the story continues. The rabbis, led by Rabban Gamaliel, take revenge against Rabbi Eliezer. While his miracles may be impressive, he has violated legal jurisprudence. This is more than a ruling about an oven. This is war. If Rabban Gamaliel wasn’t heavy handed right now, unifying the people and forcing them to accept majority rule, Judaism might not survive.

So the rabbis take a vote, and they excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer. They declare that *everything* that he has *ever* ruled ritually pure is now impure. Majority rule is so vital to communal cohesion that even a draconian punishment such as this is permissible.

It is Rabbi Akiva, a student of Rabbi Eliezer, who volunteers to deliver the bad news to his teacher. Only he understands the danger of an insult such as this, a danger that could bring about a plague that could destroy the world. He dresses in clothes of mourning, and he travels to see Rabbi Eliezer. Ever so delicately he says, "My teacher, it appears that your colleagues are distancing themselves from you."

Rabbi Eliezer knows what this means. It's more than distancing, it's the shattering of a relationship. He's devastated. His colleagues have humiliated him. He tears his clothes in mourning and begins to weep. This excommunication is serious business. Rabbi Eliezer's cries reach up to God. In response to the shaming of Rabbi Eliezer, God destroys a third of the world's olive, wheat, and barley crops. Even the dough in women's hands swells and spoils. Everything that Rabbi Eliezer casts his eyes upon bursts into flames.

Now if only the story ended here, we could discuss whether the ends justify the means, and we could consider the challenges of governing in difficult times.

But, the story continues. As Rabbi Eliezer's cries reach up to God, Rabban Gamaliel just happens to be on a boat. A great storm erupts, and a wave rises up about to drown him. This is retribution for the pain he has caused Rabbi Eliezer. His life hangs in the balance. Rabban Gamaliel prays to God. "Master of the Universe, I didn't excommunicate Rabbi Eliezer for my own personal honor, or for the honor of my father's house. I did it for Your honor so that disputes will not proliferate. Majority rule must be respected by everyone."

His actions, while perhaps not admirable, are in support of the community. God is appeased. The storm subsides.

Rabbi Eliezer continues to grieve over the loss of his community, his reputation, everything he has ever worked for. Now his very wise wife, Ima Shalom, who just happens to be the sister of Rabban Gamaliel, knows that a prayer that is said by someone in pain is the most powerful of all prayers. So, every day she interferes with her husband's prayers to prevent his calls for revenge against Rabban Gamaliel from being heard by God.

One day Ima Shalom hears a knock on the door, just as her husband begins to pray. It's a poor person begging for bread. She's stuck. How could she not help a poor person in need? But how could she not support her husband in his despair as he prays? And how could she not protect her brother from her husband's prayers?

She decides that the poor man's hunger takes precedence. She turns to get the man a loaf of bread, and in that very moment Rabbi Eliezer's vengeful prayer slips out of his mouth and goes straight up to God.

Ima Shalom turns to her husband. "You have killed my brother."

The words are barely out of her mouth when the shofar is sounded, signaling the death of Rabban Gamaliel. “How did you know that this would happen?” asks Rabbi Eliezer. She explains, “All the gates of Heaven are locked, except for the gates of *ona’at devarim*, of mistreating people with our words” (Bava Metzia 59a-59b).

And so, the story *finally* ends.

It ends with a message about the devastating effect of *ona’at devarim* – a broad prohibition against all kinds of speech including humiliating, shaming, and insulting others.

The story – the Oven of Akhnai – is a play on words. The oven belonged to a man named Akhnai, and in Aramaic, Akhnai means snake. It is as if the rabbis surround Rabbi Eliezer with answers like a snake wraps around its prey, not allowing him to escape or giving him room to breathe. It is as if his colleagues have set out to win their debate with him, but to strangle him, to treat him with cruelty.

For the rabbis, preserving someone’s dignity – regardless of how they have behaved – couldn’t be more important. As they proclaim, “It is better to throw oneself into a burning furnace than to embarrass somebody in public.”

It’s a story worth telling on Rosh Hashanah, because this is the time that we review our own words from the year that has passed. Like Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues, we may have humiliated or abused others, been vengeful, or acted aggressively. We may have felt that same gnawing anger inside of us, boiling up uncontrolled. We may have felt that because we were wronged we deserved to get even, dole out punishments, and see others suffer.

Or maybe our actions weren’t so severe, but we mistreated others nonetheless. We spoke unkind words or responded harshly to a loved one. We were blinded by our insecurities or self-righteousness and acted poorly. We were so wrapped up in our own issues that we neglected a friend in need.

Or maybe we didn’t use enough words, or we didn’t act when given the chance. We failed to speak up. We chose apathy over engagement, ambivalence over commitment. We were guilty of standing idly by. Our silences, or our reticence to step in, caused distress to others.

As we come together over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we take an honest accounting of ourselves. We refrain from blaming others and instead review our actions and our inactions, the words we have spoken and the words we have not spoken. We use these days to reckon with the past and present, not so that we can be self-deprecating but so that we can take responsibility for our behavior and do *teshuvah*, turn to our best selves, and make amends for the harm we have caused others.

In the year to come let’s reach out to others, make a phone call, send a text, and right a wrong.

Let’s listen carefully, apologize with sincerity, and act with humility.

L’shanah tovah, may it be a good, sweet, and meaningful year.