

Rabban Gamliel and the Bet Midrash Tales of the Talmud with Rabbi Nick Renner

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving a student, who came before Rabbi Yehoshua. The student said to him, “Is the evening prayer optional or obligatory?” [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him, “Optional.”

[The student] then came before Rabban Gamliel and said to him, “Is the evening prayer optional or obligatory?” Rabban Gamliel said to him: Obligatory. The student said to Rabban Gamliel, “But didn’t Rabbi Yehoshua tell me that the evening prayer is optional?” Rabban Gamliel said to the student, “Wait until the Masters of Shields¹ enter the *bet midrash*.²”

When the Masters of Shields entered, the student stood before everyone present and asked, “Is the evening prayer optional or obligatory?” Rabban Gamliel replied, “Obligatory.” Rabban Gamliel then turned to the Sages and asked, “Is there any person who disputes this matter?” Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: No, no one disagrees. Rabban Gamliel said to Rabbi Yehoshua, “But was it not in your name that they told me that the evening prayer is optional?”

Rabban Gamliel said to him, “Yehoshua, stand on your feet and they will testify against you.” Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said, “If I was alive and the student was dead, the living can contradict the dead, and I could deny issuing that ruling. Now that I am alive and he is alive, how can the living contradict the living? I have no choice but to admit that I said it.”

In the meantime, Rabban Gamliel, as the *Nasi*,³ was sitting and lecturing, and Rabbi Yehoshua all the while was standing on his feet, because Rabban Gamliel did not instruct him to sit. He remained standing in deference to the *Nasi*. This continued for some time, until it aroused great resentment against Rabban Gamliel, and all of the people assembled began murmuring and said to Chutzpit the disseminator, “Stop conveying Rabban Gamliel’s lecture.” And he stopped.

In their murmuring they said, “How long will Rabban Gamliel continue afflicting him? Last year on Rosh Hashanah, 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 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 succeed him? 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 would be vulnerable. Perhaps due to Rabban

1 i.e. Warriors of Torah (prominent rabbis)

2 Study hall

3 Rabbinic president/political leader

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. 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, "There is room for concern. Perhaps they will remove you from office just as they removed Rabban Gamliel." He said to her, "Let a person use an expensive glass 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. This explains why Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, "I am as one who is seventy years old," and he did not say, "I *am* seventy years old."

It was taught that on that day they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter. Instead of Rabban Gamliel's selectivity of students, the new approach asserted that anyone who seeks to study should be given opportunity to do so. As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose insides are not like his outside will not enter the study hall.

The Gemara relates that on that day several benches were added to the study hall to accommodate the numerous students. Rabbi Yoḥanan 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." They showed him in his dream white jugs filled with ashes. The Gemara comments that the dream was only shown to him to ease his mind so that he would not feel bad.

It was taught that tractate Eduyot was taught that day. And everywhere they say that there was no *halakha*⁴ 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.

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Brachot 27b

⁴ Jewish law