

The Oven of Akhnai

We learned that if one cut an oven into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile that Rabbi Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean. This was the oven of Akhnai.¹ Why the oven of Akhnai? Rav Judah said in Samuel's name, "It means that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake, and proved it unclean."

It was taught that on that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. He said to them, "If the *halacha*² agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!" Instantly the carob tree was uprooted a hundred cubits out of its place. Others say four hundred cubits.

"No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they retorted. Again he said to them, "If the *halacha* agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it!" At this, the stream of water flowed backwards. "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they rejoined.

Again he urged, "If the *halacha* agrees with me, let the walls of the *bet midrash*³ prove it," and instantly the walls began to tilt. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying, "When scholars are engaged in a *halachic* dispute, what right do you have to interfere?" Thus they did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they return upright, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer. To this day they are still tilted.

Again he said to them, "If the *halacha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a *bat kol*⁴ spoke out: "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halacha* agrees with him?" But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven."⁵

What did he mean by this? Rabbi Jeremiah said, "Since the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we pay no attention to a *bat kol*, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline.'"⁶

Rabbi Nathan met Elijah and asked him, "What did Blessed Holy One do in that hour?" He replied, "He laughed, saying, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me!'"

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Bava Metzia, 59a-59b

¹ Aramaic word for a snake or serpent.

² Jewish law.

³ Study hall.

⁴ Divine voice. Lit. "Daughter of a voice."

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:12

⁶ Exodus 23:2