

The Oven of Aknai

We learned elsewhere: If one cut [an oven] into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean; and this was the oven of 'Aknai. Why [the oven of] 'Aknai? — Said Rav Judah in Samuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments as a snake, and proved it unclean.

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: "If the *halacha* 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 the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon 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 schoolhouse prove it," whereupon the walls began to tilt. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: "When scholars are engaged in a *halachic* dispute, what right do you have to interfere?" Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again he said to them: "If the *halacha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a *bat kol* spoke out: "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halacha* agrees with him?" But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven."¹ What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: "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."

R. Natan met Eliahu and asked him: "What did *haKadosh, Baruch hu*, do in that hour?" — "He laughed," he replied, "saying, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me!'"

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Bava Metzia, 59

¹ Deuteronomy 30:12

Oven of Aknai II

It was said: On that day, all articles [that had come in contact with the oven] which were declared clean by R. Eliezer were collected and burned. [The sages] took a vote and excommunicated him. They said, "Who will go and inform him?" R. Akiva replied, "I will go, lest a person who is unworthy of this mission go, and thus destroy the whole world."

What did R. Akiva do? He put on black garments and wrapped himself in black, and came to sit down at a distance of four cubits from R. Eliezer. R. Eliezer asked, "Akiva, what is the matter?" R. Akiva replied, "Rabbi, it seems your colleagues are distancing themselves from you."

R. Eliezer tore his clothing, took off his shoes, and sat on the ground and he cried. The world was then stricken—a third of the olive crop, a third of the wheat harvest, and a third of the barley harvest were all lost. Some say the dough in women's hands was spoiled.

We learned in a *Baraita*: Great was the calamity that day, for everything upon which R. Eliezer fixed his gaze burned up. Rabban Gamliel was sailing on a ship that day. A huge wave rose and nearly drowned him. "It seems to me," he said, "that this must be on account of R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanos," whereupon he rose to his feet and declared, "Master of the Universe, it is known and revealed before You that I acted, not to safeguard my honor, nor to safeguard the honor of my father's house, but for Your Own honor, so that dispute may not be rampant in Israel." At this, the sea subsided.

Ima Shalom was R. Eliezer's wife, and the sister of Rabban Gamliel. After the incident she did not allow R. Eliezer to lower his head in prayer.² Now a certain day happened to be Rosh Hodesh, but she thought that the previous month had twenty nine days, and so the thirtieth day was Rosh Hodesh, and thus R. Eliezer could not recite the *Tachanun*. However, the previous month had thirty days, so he was permitted to recite *Tachanun*. According to others, she was distracted when a poor man came to the door, and she took bread out to him. When she returned, she found that R. Eliezer had his head down and was reciting *Tachanun*.

"Get up!" she cried out. "You have killed my brother!" Meanwhile an announcement came from the house of Rabban Gamliel that he had just died. R. Eliezer asked his wife, "How did you know that?" She replied "I have a tradition from the house of my father: all gates are locked except for the gates of wounded feelings."

Babylonian Talmud
Tractate Bava Metzia, 59

² This refers to the *Tachanun* prayer of supplication that is said after the weekday Amidah prayer, but not on Rosh Hodesh and Yom Tov.