

Toldot Shimshon

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Chapter II – Mishnah 10

הוא הִנֵּה אומר, אם יהיו כל חכמי ישראל בכף מאזניים, ורבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס בכף שנייה, מכריע הוא את כלם. אבא שאול אומר משמו, אם יהיו כל חכמי ישראל בכף מאזניים ורבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס אף עמהם, ורבי אלעזר בן ערוד בכף שנייה, מכריע הוא את כלם.

He [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus on the other scale, he would outweigh them all.

[But] Abba Shaul said in [Rabbi Yochanan's] name: If all the sages of Israel were on one scale of the balance, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus also with them, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach on the other scale, [Rabbi Elazar ben Arach] would outweigh them all.

אִי שְׂמִים, מי הביאו לענגן זה, לראות מי הגדול ומי הקטן, ומהו המוסר שאנו למדים מזו המשנה, אם אדרבא הוא דבר המביא לידי קנאה, חס ושלום. ועוד, איך נפל מחלוקת בדבריו, שאבא שאול אומר להפך משמו.

O Heavens! Who brought [the Tanna] to this matter, to see who is the greater and who is the smaller? And what is the moral lesson that we learn from this Mishnah, if, to the contrary, it is something that leads to envy, G-d forbid?

Furthermore, we see how discord can occur by his words, for Abba Shaul said the opposite of what Rabban Yochanan said, and yet he said it in [Rabban Yochanan's own] name!

אמנם כבר אמרנו במשנה הקודמת, שאלו התמשה תלמידים רומזים לתמש אצבעות שבנד, והנה אנו רואים שאצבע אהד דהינו הגודל, נתרסק מתביריו. אם כן, שמע מינה, שאהד מהם הוא יותר גדול וקשוב כמו כולם יחד, שהרי קבע מקום לעצמו בייחוד. ולפי שיש מחלוקת בשם הגודל והזרת, שיש אומרים שהעב שבכלם נקרא זרת, והוא הבקו האמור בתורה. והקטן שבכולם, נקרא גודל, כמו שקתב הבחיי בפרשת צו את-אהרן, ועין שם.

However, we already said in the preceding Mishnah, that these five disciples allude to the five fingers that are in a hand, and here we see that one finger, which is the *bohen* [בֹּהֵן], the thumb, is distanced from its fellows. If so, we hear from that, that one of them is greater and more important than all of them together, for he fixed a place for himself in isolation.

That is, in the previous Mishnah, the Toldot Shimshon provided an analysis that each of the five disciples corresponded to one of the fingers. The first disciple listed, Rabbi Eliezer ben

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Hyrchanus, corresponded to the *zeret*, which we understood to be the pinky. The Mishnah then listed Rabbi Joshua ben Chananiah, Rabbi Yosei, the priest, and Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, corresponding, respectively, to the ring finger, the middle finger, and the index finger. Then the last disciple listed, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, corresponded to the *gudal*, which we understood to be the thumb.

However, if Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had been following that approach, and if we consider the thumb the most important, then he should have considered Rabbi Elazar ben Arach as the greatest disciple. Instead, he is first quoted here in this Mishnah as having cited Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus as being the greatest!

There is a dispute regarding the term *gudal* [גודל] and the term *zeret* [זרת]. In the previous Mishnah, we said that the *gudal* was the thumb, and the *zeret* was the pinky. **However, there are some who say that the thickest of all of them is called the *zeret*, and that this is a synonym for the *bohen* [בהן], the thumb spoken of in the Torah.** According to those who believe that the *zeret* is the thumb, then **the smallest of all of them, i.e., the pinky, is called *gudal*. This is as Rabbeinu Behaye wrote on parshat Tzav, and see there.**¹

משום הכי, רצה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי לומר, שמי שהוא רומז נגד אותו האצבע שקבע מקום לעצמו, הוא סימן שהוא יותר גדול. ולפי שאין אנו יודעים אותו בבירור, לפיכך אבא שאול אומר להפך.

Because of this, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai wanted to say, that [the disciple] who alludes to this finger that fixed a place for itself, the thumb, is a sign that he is the greater student. Because we don't know this clearly, which term refers to the thumb and which to the pinky, there is some confusion. **Therefore** this Mishnah first quotes Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai as saying that Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus would outweigh all other disciples combined, and then **Abba Shaul**, in the name of Rabban Yochanan himself, **says the opposite** of that, that it should indeed be considered that Rabbi Elazar ben Arach would outweigh all other disciples.

ואם תאמר, והא רבי אלעזר בן הורקנוס אמרנו שהוא כנגד החושן, שהוא נגד הלב, וזה נדאי מודדין מן הקטנה. ויש לומר, דגם זה לאו דוקא, שהרי הערוף בערוף אצבע פירש שמדידת החושן היה מהאצבע הקטנה שקורין זרת, עד האצבע הנקרא גודל, ואם כן, בזה מתחיל המדה, ובזה מסיים. וכך אנו יכולים לומר שהוא הזרת, וכך אנו יכולים לומר שהוא הגודל, שהרי המדה היתה מזה לזה. ואף רבי אלעזר בן ערוף שהוא כמעט המתגבר, יכול להיות נגד הקטנה, שיתגבר ויעשה גדול, כדכתיב "הקטן יהיה לאלה".

Perhaps you will say, that for Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, we said that he's analogous to the breastplate of the high priest, which is against the heart, and [the breastplate] must be measured by the little finger. That is, the Torah tells us that the breastplate was two *zerets* by one

¹ Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa ("Rabbeinu Behaye") (1255–1340), in his commentary on Lev. 8:23: "The word *bohen* used by the Torah to describe the thumb, is [typically] known in Talmudic Hebrew as the *gudal*, because it is the thickest of the five fingers. [However,] some say that the thickest one is *zera* and the smallest is *gudal*. . . ."

zeret, and was folded so that it was one *zeret* by one *zeret*.² **But it can be said that even this statement that the *zeret* is equivalent to the pinky is not specifically so, for the Aruch,³ in the analysis of the word “finger” [etzba] [אָצְבָּע], explained that the measurement of the breastplate was based on the small finger, that was called *zeret*, until the finger that is called the *gudal*, and if so, from this one the measurement begins, and with this one it concludes.**

I.e., *zeret* is a measurement of a handbreadth between the tips of the thumb and the pinky when the hand is spread apart, so whether one measures starting with the thumb and ending with the pinky, or vice versa, the distance will be the same. **Thus, we are able to say that [this disciple] is the *zeret* as we said in the previous Mishnah, and thus, we are able to say that [this disciple] is the *gudal*, for the measurement of the same was from this one to this one.** I.e., maybe the Toldot Shimshon was wrong in the previous Mishnah to correspond Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus to the pinky, and should have equated him with the thumb.

Similarly, even regarding **Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who is like a spring that [ever] gathers force,**⁴ while the previous Mishnah said he was analogous to the thumb, we could instead say that **he would be analogous to the small one, who would overcome and become great, as is written, “The little one will become a thousand.”**⁵ Thus, instead of saying that the five disciples were comparable to the pinky, ring finger, middle finger, index finger, and thumb respectively, i.e., the order given in the Talmud, perhaps they should have been compared to the thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, and pinky respectively, opposite the order of the Talmud.⁶

וְעוֹד כִּלְכֵל דְּבָרָיו בְּמִשְׁפָּט הַמוֹסֵר, דָּאָף עַל גַּב דְּאִסְיָקְנָא בְּסוּף הוֹרְיֹתוֹ, סִינֵי וְעוֹקֵר הָרִים, סִינֵי עֲדִיף, הֲנֵי מִיְלֵי לְמִנּוֹתוֹ לְרֵאשׁ יְשִׁיבָה, מִטְעָם דְּהַפֵּל צָרִיכִין לְמַרֵי חֲטִיָּיא. אֲבָל מְכַל מְקוּם, מִי שֶׁהוּא מְפוֹלְכָל בְּיֹתֵר, יֵשׁ לוֹ מִצַּד אַחַר שֶׁבַח גְּדוֹל כְּמוֹתוֹ, וְיֹתֵר מְמֻנּוֹ, כְּדַחְזִינּוֹן הֵתֵם, שְׂאָף עַל פִּי שָׂרֵב יוֹסֵף הָיָה סִינֵי, לֹא קָבִיל עֲלֵיהּ לְמִיְהוּי רִישָׁא, מִשּׁוּם יְקָרִיָה דְרַבָּה, וְכֵן בְּכַתּוּבֹת, הוּוּ מְנַצֵּוּ רַבִּי חֲנִינְיָא וְרַבִּי חֲזָא, אָמַר לֵיהּ, בְּהַדִּי דִּידֵי קָא מְנַצִּית, דָּאֵי חַס וְשְׁלוֹם תְּשַׁתְּכַח תּוֹרָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מִהַדְרָנָא לָהּ מְפֻלְיָא.

Further, [Rabbi Elazar ben Arach] conducted his affairs with justice,⁷ and he may be favored **despite the conclusion of the Gemara at the end of tractate Horayot**, which says:

Rabbi Yochanan said: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and the Rabbis disagreed with regard to this [matter between which type of Torah scholar is preferable: one who is a “Sinai,” i.e., one who is extremely knowledgeable, or “one

² Ex. 28:16.

³ Nathan ben Yechiel of Rome (c. 1035–1106) (“the Aruch”), Jewish-Italian lexicographer. The *Aruch* was his dictionary of Talmudic and Midrashic words.

⁴ As stated in the previous Mishnah.

⁵ Isaiah 60:22.

⁶ If so, the analysis of the second and fourth disciples would have to be revised to correspond to the index finger and ring finger, respectively. The Toldot Shimshon does not address this.

⁷ Cf. Ps. 112:5, “All goes well with the man who lends generously, who conducts his affairs with justice.”

who uproots mountains,” i.e., one who is extremely incisive]. One said a **“Sinai” is preferable** and one said that one who uproots mountains is preferable.

Rav Yosef was a “Sinai,” and Rabba was one who uproots mountains. They sent [a message from Babylonia] to there [the Land of Israel, asking] which takes precedence? They sent [a response that a] “Sinai” is preferable, as the Master said: Everyone requires the owner of the wheat [i.e., one who is an expert in the sources]. But even so, Rav Yosef did not accept upon himself [the appointment of the head of the yeshiva]. Rabba reigned for 22 years, and [only] then did Rav Yosef reign.

- Horayot 14a

Thus, [Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus] was fit to be named as the head of the academy at Lod,⁸ for the reason that everyone requires the owner of the wheat.

But nevertheless, one who is wiser, on the other hand, has praise as great as he is, as we see there. Thus, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach may have been favored even though Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was a “Sinai.” **For even though** Horayot 14a tells us that **Rav Yosef was a “Sinai,” he didn’t accept for himself to be the head** of the yeshiva, **because of his concern for Rabba’s honor. Thus, in tractate Ketubot, Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Chiya were arguing. [Rabbi Chanina] said to [Rabbi Chiya], “You are arguing with me? If, G-d forbid, Torah would be forgotten from Israel, I would restore it through my analyses.”**⁹

וְנָהוּ הַמּוֹסֵר שְׂבָא לְהוֹדִיעֵנוּ, דְּמַאי דְּאָמְרִין סִינֵי עָדִיף, לֹא לְגַמְרֵי מִשְׁמַע. וּמִתְחַלֵּה נִמְן הַשְּׂבַח הָרְאוּי לְר' אֱלִיעֶזֶר, שְׁהֵי לֹ הַרְבֵּה בְּקִיאוֹת וְזַכְרוֹן, שֶׁהוּא כְּמוֹ סִינֵי, וְאִסְרָא כְּדֵי, מִצַּד אִסְרָא נִמְן הַשְּׂבַח לְרַבֵּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן עֲרָף שְׁהֵי חָרִיף בְּיוֹמָא, וְעוֹלָה שְׂבַחוֹ אִף עַל שְׂבַחוֹ שֶׁל רַבֵּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס.

This is the moral lesson that [the Tanna] is coming to inform us: that as far as saying that a “Sinai” is preferable, it is not the complete conclusion. Initially, he gave suitable praise to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who had great expertise and memory, for he was like a “Sinai.” Afterward, on the other hand, he gave the praise to Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who was sharper, and raised his praise above the praise of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus.

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⁸ Sanhedrin 32b.

⁹ Ketubot 103b.