

Beyond Argument

We have learned elsewhere [concerning a Passover oven constructed from coils of clay]: If one cut it into segments and placed sand between each segment Rabbi Eliezer declared it to be impervious to ritual impurity while the Sages declared it to be liable to ritual impurity. This is the oven of Akhnai. Why Akhnai? Rav Judah said, quoting Samuel: The sages encircled Rabbi Eliezer snake/akhna like and declared the oven to be liable to ritual impurity.

The sages taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer offered every possible refutation [of his colleague's arguments] but the colleagues would not accept them. [Finally,] he said to them: If the halacha/law is according to my opinion then let this carob tree offer proof. The carob tree uprooted itself from its place to a distance of one hundred cubits—and some say that it was four hundred cubits! They responded: We do not derive halachic/legal proof from a carob tree! He retorted, saying to them: If the halacha/law is as I say then let this water channel prove it! The water in the channel began flowing backwards. They replied to him: We do not derive halachic/legal proof from a water channel! He retorted, saying: If the halacha is as I say then let the walls of the Bet Midrash/study house prove it! The walls of the Bet Midrash/study house leaned as if to fall.

Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls: If the disciples of the sages dispute with each other in matters of halacha what place do you have in the matter! They neither fell—out of respect for Rabbi Joshua—nor did they straighten up—out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer. So they remain leaning and standing.

[Rabbi Eliezer] returned [to the argument] and said to them: If the halacha is as I say then let the heavens prove it! A bat kol/echo of the Divine Voice came from the heavens and said: What issue do you have with Rabbi Eliezer seeing that the halacha always agrees with him?

Rabbi Joshua leapt to his feet and quoted: *It is not in the heavens* (Deuteronomy 30:12). What is the import of *It is not in the heavens*? Rabbi Jeremiah said: Since Torah had already been given from Mt. Sinai we do not consider a bat kol/echo of a Voice. Indeed, you have long since written in the Torah on Mt. Sinai *after the majority to incline* (Exodus 23:2).

Rabbi Nathan met Elijah. He said to him: What was the Blessed Holy One doing just then? God laughed and said: My children have defeated me. My children have defeated me.

They say that on that very day the sages gathered all of the debatable items that Rabbi Eliezer had declared clean and burned them in a fire. Then they took a vote and excommunicated him. Then they said: Who will go and inform him? Rabbi Akiba

offered: I will go lest someone unsuitable go and inform him thus destroying the entire world.

What did Rabbi Akiba do? He dressed in black garments and wrapped himself in black robes and sat before him at a distance of four cubits. He [Rabbi Eliezer] said to him: Akiba, has something unusual happened? He replied: Master, it seems to me that your colleagues distance themselves from you. Then Rabbi Eliezer tore his garments, took off his shoes, and he, too, slipped down and sat in the dirt while tears streamed from his eyes.

The world was smitten: One third of the olive crop, one third of the wheat and one third of the barley. Some say that even the dough in the hands of the women decayed. It has been long taught: Such calamity was there that day that every place to which Rabbi Eliezer turned his glance was incinerated. Furthermore, Rabban Gamaliel, was traveling on a ship that was threatened by a giant wave that could drown him. He said: It seems to me that this is happening on account of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkonos. He leapt to his feet and said: Master of the world, it is clear to you that I have not acted thus for my own honor nor for the honor of my father's house. I have acted for your honor so that a stalemate might not grow in Israel. The sea relented from its fury.

Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, was the sister of Rabban Gamaliel. Now, from the time of this incident and onward she would not give her husband a private opportunity to fall on his face [in personal supplications].

One day, she had thought it was the new moon—a festive day on which there are no supplications—but she had mistaken a full month for a defective month. Others say that a pauper had come to the door and she had left her husband in order to take the pauper some bread. When she returned to him, she found him fallen on his face. Get up! she cried. You have killed my brother!

In the meanwhile, an announcement came from the house of Rabban Gamaliel that he had died. Rabbi Eliezer said to her: How did you know? She replied: Such is the tradition that I have received from my father's house: Every gate to heaven is locked at one time or another except for the gate of hurt feelings.

(Babylonian Talmud Baba Metzia 59a-b)