

WHAT WERE THE SAGES DISCUSSING IN BENEI BERAK?

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ON SEDER NIGHT, we tell a story about another Seder in which five sages discuss the Exodus all night long. I have always wondered: What were they talking about?¹ Which part of the story were they curious to recount, and what engaged them so deeply all through the night such that their students had to remind them it was time to recite Shema?

I want to imagine a conversation based on a different story about these five sages together, the only other time we find this grouping in Rabbinic literature. This other story, which appears in the Talmud and various midrash compilations, describes R. Yehoshua, R. Tarfon, R. Elazar ben Azariah, and R. Akiva coming to visit R. Eliezer, who is sick.²

Three of the Sages, R. Tarfon, R. Yehoshua, and R. Elazar ben Azariah, compliment R. Eliezer, perhaps trying to cheer him up. They claim, each in turn, that he is better than the sun, the rain, and even one's parents, because those offer gifts only in this world, but R. Eliezer—through his teaching—leads them to the world to come.

But it is R. Akiva who says something different in this conversation, and literally gets R. Eliezer to sit up straight in bed. R. Akiva tells the story of Menashe, one of the worst kings of Israel. In fact, according to the anonymous opinion in Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:2, he is one of three kings who will never merit the world to come.

But Menashe's story is not so simple, because it is

told twice—once in Kings, and again in Chronicles. In the first telling, Menashe is evil through to his final days (2 Kings 21:4-6,16).

In the second telling, though, in 2 Chronicles (33:1-21), Menashe lives a life of idolatry and wickedness, but then has a change of heart. He is captured, put in chains, and sent to Babylonia. That is when he prays to God, realizes that YHVH is the true God, and does genuine *teshuvah*. God hears Menashe's prayer, and restores him to the throne in Jerusalem. Then Menashe tears down the altars he had built and reinstates proper worship to the Temple. Indeed, according to R. Yehudah's dissenting opinion in the *mishnah* referenced above, this turn of events means Menashe will indeed be admitted to the world to come.

R. Akiva understands from this story that sometimes suffering can have benefits and yield change.³ The implication of telling this story to R. Eliezer, who is sick in bed, is clear: perhaps there is something that R. Eliezer did wrong and for which he must now repent. The suffering of his illness—parallel to Menashe's suffering in exile—can be an occasion for self-examination and change. It seems a bit much to accuse R. Eliezer of the same level of sin as Menashe.⁴ And yet, R. Akiva may be subtly urging R. Eliezer to examine his deeds, and to search out his own wrongdoing.

In some *midrashim*, Menashe's turnaround becomes an illustration of the extent of God's capacity for forgiveness. Menashe prays to God, but the angels try

1 It seems the Haggadah, as we recite it today, imagines a conversation begun by R. Elazar ben Azariah about the meaning of Deuteronomy 16:3 ("all the days of your life"). But this discussion does not originate in the Haggadah; it is a quote from Mishnah Berakhot 1:5, and not necessarily related to the Seder night conversation.

2 This story appears in Bavli Sanhedrin 101a-b; Sifrei Devarim #32, ed. Finkelstein, pp. 57-58; Mekhilta Massekhta de-va-Hodesh 10, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, pp. 240-241. See further E.E. Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 392, nn. 79 and 80.

3 This is a common tannaitic approach to suffering (see the sources in the previous note), although in later periods, other rabbis rejected positive aspects of suffering. See, for instance, Bavli Berakhot 5b and E. E. Urbach, *Hazal*, pp. 392-396.

4 Although, see Tosefta Hulin 2:24 for R. Eliezer's portrayal as attracted (albeit briefly) to Christianity, and some fallout of this in later Rabbinic literature in Holger Michael Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (2011), pp. 213-236.

to block his prayer. They say to God: “How could You accept the prayer of one who was an idol worshiper of the worst degree?!” But God responds:⁵

תלמוד ירושלמי סנהדרין יב, דף כח טור ג
אם איני מקבלו בתשובה הרי אני נועל את הדלת
בפני כל בעלי תשובה.

Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2 (28c)

If I don't accept his repentance, behold I will
be locking the door of repentance for all
penitents!

In later Rabbinic imagination (in Pirkei de-R. Eliezer 43), there played out a scenario in which even Pharaoh becomes—like Menashe—a model penitent. He is spared from the Sea and becomes the King of Nineveh. When Yonah comes to prophesy destruction, it is Pharaoh—the king of this sinning city—who leads his people in a process of *teshuvah*.

These five rabbis, then, who themselves no longer live in the fully redeemed reality of the Exodus, but in the wake of the Temple's destruction, might be interested in the power of *teshuvah*. In their retelling of redemption, perhaps they are taking stock, considering their own accountability, and reaching out to God in faith that “the gates of *teshuvah* are always open” (Eikhah Rabbah 3:15).

I like to imagine them wondering if on this night of freedom they were meant to examine their own deeds, and ask for their own forgiveness. Indeed, although we don't always notice this aspect of Pesah, forgiveness is a major theme of the holiday: Pesah is known as a day of judgment on the crops of the year to come (Mishnah

Rosh Hashanah 1:2); in Musaf, when reciting the poems asking God to grant dew, the prayer leader wears a *kittel*, normally reserved for High Holidays; and the peak of the Dayyeinu song concludes with the building of the Temple to offer atonement for our sins.

Maybe one underlying anxiety on Seder night is how we understand our own responsibility to God in light of our freedom, or, perhaps more to the point, in light of our current exile. What if we aren't perfect? Is the story of Pesah only good for the righteous, but those who sinned are forever doomed? Do we use our freedom to serve God and take responsibility for our choices the way we should?

The story of Menashe offers an unexpected possibility: even egregious sinners can repent. This might be hard to swallow—but that is what makes God different from humans, and from angels. God will accept the *teshuvah* of even the worst sinner—even Menashe, even Pharaoh. And if God can do that, surely God can forgive us.

This is a conversation for all night—and for the ages! ♦

⁵ See also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 24 (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 364). Compare the often-discussed story of God rebuking the angels for rejoicing at the death of the Egyptians in Bavli Megillah 10b.