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'Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.'

Proverbs 27:17



Introduction

Welcome to the third week of this course of the Alyth Chavruta Project. In this course, we will once again dive into a *sugya* from the Babylonian Talmud. Having had the diversion into the story of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish, the text this week returns to the longer legend about Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon.

The material in this text pack is designed to be studied over three weeks, while we take a break for the winter holidays. With your chavruta partner, you can decide how many sessions to divide into. The text itself can be found here in both Hebrew only and Hebrew with translation. For those with some knowledge of Hebrew, we encourage you to attempt your own translation, but there is absolutely no expectation that you engage with the Hebrew. As usual, there is also no requirement to get to the end of the pack – we have provided more than you can get through in an hour of study, and we encourage you to focus on understanding a small amount rather than becoming confused by a greater amount.

Further resources and advice on how to get the most out of chavruta can be found in our [FAQs](#). We look forward to seeing you on Monday to share our learning with each other.

Blessing for Study

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסּוֹק
בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrey Torah.

וְאָפִילוּ הָכִי לָא סְמַךְ רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אֲדַעְתִּיהָ, קָבִיל עָלַיָּה
יְסוּרִי. בְּאוֹרְתָא הוּוּ מְיִיכִי לִיה שִׁיתִין נְמֻטִי, לְצַפְרָא נְגָדִי מִתּוֹתִיהָ
שִׁיתִין מְשִׁכְלִי דְמָא וְכִיבָא.

לְמַחַר עֲבָדָה לִיה דְּבִיתָהוּ שִׁיתִין מִינִי לְפָדָא וְאָכִיל לְהוּ וּבְרִי. וְלָא
הוּוּ שְׁבָקָא לִיה דְּבִיתָהוּ לְמִיפְקָ לְבִי מְדַרְשָׁא כִּי הִיכִי דְלָא לְדַחְקוּהוּ
רַבְּנָן.

בְּאוֹרְתָא אָמַר לְהוּ: אַחִי וְרַעִי, בּוֹאוּ! בְּצַפְרָא אָמַר לְהוּ: זִילוּ מִפְּנֵי
בִּיטוּל תּוֹרָה. יוֹמָא חַד שְׁמַעָה דְּבִיתָהוּ, אָמַרָה לִיה: אֵת קָא מִיִּיתִית
לְהוּ עֵילְוִיד! כְּלִיתָ מְמוֹן שֶׁל בֵּית אָבָא. אִימְרָדָה, אֲזִלָּה לְבֵית נְשָׂא.

סְלִיקוּ וְאָתוּ הֵנָּךְ [שִׁיתִין] סְפוּנָאִי, עֵיִילוּ לִיה שִׁיתִין עֲבָדִי כִּי נְקִיטִי
שִׁיתִין אֲרַנְקִי, וְעֲבָדוּ לִיה שִׁיתִין מִינִי לְפָדָא וְאָכִיל לְהוּ.

יוֹמָא חַד, אָמַרָה לָהּ לְבִרְתָּהּ: זִילִי בְּקִי בְּאֲבוּךָ מֵאִי קָא עָבִיד
הָאִידְנָא? אָתִיָּא, אָמַר לָהּ: זִילִי אָמַרִי לְאִימִיךָ: שְׁלָנוּ, גְּדוּל מִשְׁלָהֶם.
קָרִי אֲנַפְשִׁיהָ: "הִיָּתָה כְּאֲנִיּוֹת סוּחַר מְמַרְחָק תְּבִיא לְחֻמָּה". אָכַל
וְשִׁתִּי וּבְרִי נִפְקָ לְבִי מְדַרְשָׁא.



אֵייתוּ לְקַמִּיָּה שִׁיתִין מִיַּנִּי דְמָא - טְהַרִּינְהוּ. הֵנָּה קָא מְרַנְנִי רַבְנִין
וְאָמְרִי: סְלָקָא דְעֵתְךָ לִית בְּהוּ חַד סְפָק? אָמַר לְהוּ: אִם כְּמוֹתִי הוּא
- יְהִי כּוֹלָם זְכָרִים, וְאִם לֹא - תְּהֵא נְקֵבָה אַחַת בִּינֵיהֶם. הִי כּוֹלָם
זְכָרִים. וְאִסִּיקוּ לְהוּ "רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר" עַל שְׁמִיָּה.

תְּנִיָּא, אָמַר רַבִּי: כְּמָה פְּרִיָּה וּרְבִיָּה בִּיטְלָה רְשָׁעָה זֹו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

וְאֶפְּלוּ הָכִי לָא סַמַּךְ רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אֲדַעְתִּיהּ, קַבִּיל עָלֶיהָ
 יְסוּרֵי. בְּאוֹרְתָא הוּוּ מְיִיכִי לִיהּ שִׁיתִין נְמֻטֵי, לְצַפְרָא נְגָדֵי מִתּוֹתִיהּ
 שִׁיתִין מְשִׁיכְלֵי דְמָא וְכִיבָא. לְמַחַר עֲבָדָה לִיהּ דְּבִיתָהּוּ שִׁיתִין מִינֵי
 לְפָדָא וְאָכִיל לָהּ וּבְרֵי. וְלֹא הָוֹת שְׁבָקָא לִיהּ דְּבִיתָהּוּ לְמִיפָק לְבֵי
 מְדַרְשָׁא כִּי הִיכִי דָּלָא לְדַחֲקוּהוּ רַבָּנִין.

בְּאוֹרְתָא אָמַר לָהּ: אַחֵי וְרַעִי, בּוֹאוּ! בְּצַפְרָא אָמַר לָהּ: זִילוּ מִפְּנֵי
 בִּיטוּל תּוֹרָה. יוֹמָא חַד שְׁמַעָה דְּבִיתָהּוּ, אָמְרָה לִיהּ: אַתְּ קָא מִיִּיתִית
 לָהּ עֵילוּיָךְ! כְּלִיתָ מְמוֹן שֶׁל בֵּית אָבָא. אִימְרָדָה, אֲזִלָּה לְבֵית נָשָׂא.

סְלִיקוּ וְאִתּוּ הֵנָּךְ [שִׁיתִין] סְפוּנָאֵי, עֵיילוּ לִיהּ שִׁיתִין עֲבָדֵי כִּי נְקִיטֵי
 שִׁיתִין אַרְנָקֵי, וְעֲבָדוּ לִיהּ שִׁיתִין מִינֵי לְפָדָא וְאָכִיל לָהּ.

יוֹמָא חַד, אָמְרָה לָהּ לְבִרְתָּהּ: זִילִי בְּקֵי בְּאַבּוּךָ מֵאֵי קָא עֲבִיד
 הַאִידְנָא? אֲתִנָּא, אָמַר לָהּ: זִילִי אָמְרֵי לְאִימִיךָ: שְׁלָנוּ, גְּדוּל מִשְׁלָהֶם.
 קָרִי אֲנַפְשִׁיהּ: "הִיָּתָה כְּאֲנִיּוֹת סוּחַר מְמַרְחָק תְּבִיא לְחָמָה". אַכֵּל
 וּשְׁתֵי וּבְרֵי נִפְק לְבֵי מְדַרְשָׁא.

Now, despite this, Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon did not rely upon his own opinion. He accepted afflictions upon himself. At night they would spread out for him sixty [layers of] felt. In the morning, they would remove from under him sixty basins of blood and pus. The next day, his wife would prepare for him sixty kinds of pap,¹ and he ate them and became healthy. And his wife would not allow him to go to the House of Study so that the Rabbis would not press him.

¹ Pap is a form of semi-liquid food, in this case made of figs.



At night he would say to them,² ‘My brothers and friends, come.’ In the morning he said to them, ‘Go’ – because of the disruption of the Torah. One day, his wife heard him invite [his afflictions]. She said to him, ‘You are bringing them upon yourself! You have spent the money of the house of my father.’ She rebelled and went to her father’s house.

A certain group of sixty sailors came. They brought him sixty slaves who were holding sixty moneybags. And they made him sixty kinds of pap and he ate them.

One day, she [Rabbi Elazar’s wife] said to her daughter, ‘Go and find out about your father, what is he doing today? She came. He said to her, ‘Go [and] say to your mother: Ours is greater than theirs.’ He read [the following verse] about himself: ‘She is like the merchant ships; she brings her bread from afar’ (Proverbs 31:14). He ate and drank and became healthy and went out to the House of Study.

Questions

- Why does Rabbi Elazar accept afflictions upon himself? And why does he invite them upon himself at night?
- What does this tell us about the Rabbis’ attitude towards Torah study?
- Why does Rabbi Elazar say ‘ours is greater than theirs’?
- Why does he quote the verse from Proverbs about himself? Why might the choice of verse be significant?

² Understood to mean his afflictions.

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אֵייתוּ לְקַמִּיָּה שִׁיתִין מִיַּי דְּמָא – טְהַרִּינְהוּ. הִנֵּה קָא מְרַנְנֵי רַבְנִין
וְאָמְרִי: סְלָקָא דְעֵתְךָ לִית בְּהוּ חַד סְפָק? אָמַר לְהוּ: אִם כְּמוֹתִי הוּא
– יְהִי כּוֹלָם זְכָרִים, וְאִם לָאוּ – תְּהֵא נְקֵבָה אַחַת בִּינֵיהֶם. הִי כּוֹלָם
זְכָרִים. וְאִסִּיקוּ לְהוּ "רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר" עַל שְׁמֵיהּ.

תְּנִיא, אָמַר רַבִּי: כַּמָּה פְּרִיָּה וְרַבִּיָּה בִּיטְלָה רְשָׁעָה זֹו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

They brought before him sixty kinds of blood – he declared them pure.³ The Rabbis murmured against him and they said, ‘Do you think that in these there is not one doubtful case?’ He said to them, ‘If it is as I [say] – let them all be males; and if not, let there be one female amongst them.’⁴ They were all males, and they called each of them Rabbi Elazar, in his name.

It is taught [in a *baraita*]:⁵ Rabbi said,⁶ ‘How much going forth and multiplying was prevented from the Jewish people by this evil!’

Questions

- How do the two English translations differ with regard to the last part of this section (on page 8 of this text pack)?
- What can we conclude about the nature of translation and interpretation?

³ Women brought samples of their blood to the Rabbis in order to determine whether they were still deemed ritually impure on account of their menstruation.

⁴ In others, the children that would be conceived by allowing these women to have sex with their husbands by declaring them ritually pure.

⁵ A *baraita* is a teaching from the time of the Mishnah not included in the Mishnah itself.

⁶ Rabbi is the nickname for Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who was the leader of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel at the end of the second century and beginning of the third century CE.



Supplementary Texts

Rashi Commentary

עיילו ליה שיתין עבדי - לפי שעמד עליהן נחשול של ים והתפללו להנצל בזכותו של ר"א וניצולו בזכותו וכשעלו מן הים שלחו לו דורון:

They brought him sixty slaves - because a raging wave of the sea rose against them, and they prayed to be saved in the merit of Rabbi Elazar, and they were saved by his merit. When they came up from the sea, they sent him a gift.

רשעה זו - מלכות הרשעה שמינתהו תופש גנבים ולא בא לבית המדרש תמיד להראות לו הנשים את דמן ל"א על אשתו שערכבתו מלבא לבית המדרש שנים רבות:

'This evil' – Refers to the wicked kingdom that appointed him as a catcher of thieves, preventing him from regularly attending the study hall to examine women's blood (in cases of ritual purity). Alternatively, some explain it as referring to his wife, who held him back from coming to the study hall for many years.

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Note: In both translations below, the bold text represents text that is supposedly a direct translation from the original, while the unbolded text is interpretive addition.

Steinsaltz translation

תְּנִיא, אָמַר רַבִּי: כַּמָּה פְּרִיָּה וְרַבִּיָּה בִּיטְלָה רְשָׁעָה זֹו מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

It is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi** Yehuda HaNasi lamented and said concerning the wife of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon: **How much procreation** has **this evil woman prevented from the Jewish people**. She caused women not to have children by preventing her husband from going to the study hall and rendering his halakhic rulings.

ArtScroll translation

It has been taught in a Baraisa: **Rebbi said: How much procreation was eliminated by this evil [regime] from the Jewish people** when they appointed R' Elazar the son of R' Shimon as marshal!

Footnote: Since he was busy ferreting out thieves, he was not always able to come to the house of study. The women in turn could not seek rulings from him regarding their blood samples (*Rashi*, first explanation).

[Many of them were thus forced to conduct themselves as *niddahs*⁷ and refrain from marital relations even though R' Elazar the son of R' Shimon would have declared them *tahor*.]⁸ (Cf. *Rashi's* second explanation.)

⁷ A *niddah* is a woman who is deemed to be ritually impure and therefore unable to have physical contact with her husband.

⁸ *Tahor* is Hebrew for ritually pure.



A Guide to the Texts

The **Mishnah** is a Jewish legal code from approximately 200 CE, containing legal rulings and disputes of the sages which are written down there for the first time. It is the first part of what is called the 'Oral Law', which for traditional Jews is just as authoritative as the Written Law (the Tanach). The Mishnah is divided into six 'orders', and each order is divided into tractates. Tractate Bava Metzia (literally meaning 'the middle gate') is included in the order of *Nezikin* (Damages).

The **Babylonian Talmud** is the equivalent of the Jerusalem Talmud, but was instead produced in Babylonia. It was finished later (approximately 700 CE), and is generally considered to be more authoritative in matters of *halachah*. The Talmud follows the structure of the Mishnah.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) was a French scholar in the second half of the Eleventh Century. His seminal commentaries on both the Hebrew Bible and the Babylonian Talmud are still the primary explanatory tools used by those approaching these central Jewish texts today.