

## Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 28:

- 1. Good advice from the rabbi's wife.** The conflict between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua caused the rabbis to remove Rabban Gamliel from his position as the nasi, and they wanted to replace him with Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah had impeccable credentials and powerful connections, but he was very young. So he asked his wife for advice. She told him taking the position would be a risk, because there was a chance the rabbis planned only to use him and then replace him. In fact, she was right. While he wasn't fully fired from the position, after a time Rabban Gamliel did return and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was left to lecture only one out of every four weeks. But though his wife made a good point, it didn't worry Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. He said to her, "people who have fine dishware don't refuse to use it for fear it might break." Nothing lasts forever, that is reality. Why refuse to take the position just because it would only be temporary? But his wife raised another concern: he was only 18 years old. Nobody would take him seriously. And so a miracle happened, and the 18-year-old Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah grew a beard with white streaks. This explains the famous Mishna we all know from the Pesach Haggadah, in which Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah describes himself as "like a 70-year-old." Sometimes great wisdom can exist in a young body, but we can't see it because of the person's youth. This white-streaked beard helped people to see past the illusion of his youth and recognize that he truly had the wisdom of a 70-year-old. It seems as if the miracle beard grew in response to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's wife. She raised two valid concerns, and both needed to be addressed. The first concern was something that did not bother him, but the second one needed a solution, and in response a solution was granted. A wife should support her husband, but that doesn't mean agreeing with everything he says. Like Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's wife, she should share honest opinions and constructive advice.
- 2. Midgets standing on the shoulders of giants.** Legend says that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was the reincarnation of Shmuel the prophet. Whether or not that is true, all of our rabbis are part of a tradition going back centuries and even millenia. An individual rabbi is not great on his own. He stands on the shoulders of giants, building on the wisdom of the great rabbis of previous generations. Rabbi Elazar referred to himself as a 70-year-old because he trusted the added insight that his past life brought to the situation, and so he had confidence in his own judgment. (Based on teaching from the Lubavitcher Rebbe)
- 3. How selective should a yeshiva be?** When Rabban Gamliel was the nasi, he was very strict about who he let into his yeshiva. He only picked students whose inside was like their outside, meaning they were good people through and through. When Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah replaced Rabban Gamliel, hundreds of benches were added to the yeshiva to accommodate all the new students. This caused Rabban Gamliel to become depressed, worrying that perhaps his strictness had deprived so many potential students. Was he wrong to be so selective? That's a difficult question to answer. The debate goes on even today: how many students should we let into our yeshivas? Should we accept everyone, because everyone should have the opportunity to learn Torah? It sounds nice, but accepting everyone dilutes the potential for advanced students. If Harvard opened itself up to everyone, it wouldn't be Harvard anymore. If you want to have an elite school, you have to be selective.
- 4. Moving on after mistakes.** Rabban Gamliel became depressed upon realizing he might have been wrong to refuse so many students. But he had a dream in which he saw fancy pictures that were filled with dirt, signifying that the new students who had now been let in to the yeshiva looked like scholars on the outside but were like dirt on the inside. They hadn't done the necessary work and preparation, so studying Talmud would not improve their character. However, the gemara says that this dream of Rabban Gamliel's was a lie. In reality, there was

nothing wrong with the new students. Nonetheless, this was a lie that Rabban Gamliel needed to tell himself. Sometimes, when we are confronted suddenly with our own shortcomings, we need to tell ourselves lies in order to cope. Was Rabban Gamliel wrong in keeping his yeshiva so selective? It is possible. But everyone makes mistakes, and dwelling on them does no good. All we can do is try to correct our mistakes and move forward with our lives. Though we often say that regret is a necessary part of teshuva, that isn't always the case. Sometimes teshuva requires simply making changes for the better and not dwelling on the past. In this situation, the Yeshiva had already left behind Rabban Gamliel's limiting policies. All that was needed was to move forward in the new and better way.

5. **Creative solutions within the framework of halacha.** A man named Yehuda, who was a convert from the nation of Ammon, came into the beis midrash and said, "What is my status regarding marrying a Jewish woman?" According to halacha, converts from Ammon and Moav cannot marry into the Jewish community. So Rabban Gamliel told Yehuda that he could not marry a Jewish woman. But Rabbi Yehoshua said that he could. Rabban Gamliel asked Rabbi Yehoshua how he could say that, and Rabbi Yehoshua explained: Sancheriv, king of Assyria, had moved around the people of his empire. He mixed everything up and sent people to live in different countries. How does the Torah define a Moabite or an Ammonite? Is it someone who lives within the borders of Moav or Ammon? After Sancheriv moved everybody around, the people of Ammon no longer lived within the borders of Ammon, and the people who did live in Ammon were not really Ammonites. Yehuda was from the land of Ammon, but Rabbi Yehoshua claimed that he was not really an Ammonite according to the Torah, and therefore he could marry a Jewish woman. But, Rabban Gamliel said, there is a verse that says G-d will return people to their nations, including Ammon and Moav. Maybe that has already happened, and Yehuda truly is an Ammonite! Rabbi Yehoshua responded that we have another verse that says Israel (ie. the ten lost tribes) will be returned. That obviously hasn't happened yet, so we can assume the other nations also have not yet been returned to their homelands. Allowing converts from Ammon and Moav to join the community represented a major shift, as Judaism became less of a nationality and more of a religion. But the rabbis found ways to work within the confines of halacha, adapting based on historic truths contained in the words of the Prophets. The Rambam rules that the prohibition against marrying a Moabite or an Ammonite is in fact no longer in place, and will not be in the future, because of what Sancheriv did.
6. **Reconciliation of Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua.** When Rabban Gamliel saw that the other rabbis were following Rabbi Yehoshua, he said, "Since this is the case, I will go and appease him." The commentators explain that it eventually became clear to Rabban Gamliel that Rabbi Yehoshua was the major rabbinic figure of his generation and the majority was with him, and it was time to make amends. So Rabban Gamliel went to Rabbi Yehoshua's home, and while there he was shocked to see that the walls were blackened. He realized that Rabbi Yehoshua was a blacksmith, or someone whose job it was to prepare things to be burned. These were not very lofty jobs in those days. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, "Woe is the generation for which you are the leader, that you don't know the pain Torah scholars have to endure to make a living, how they must struggle to survive." Rabban Gamliel then apologized for the way he had treated Rabbi Yehoshua, but Rabbi Yehoshua wasn't interested. Rabban Gamliel said, "If you won't do it for me, forgive me out of respect for my father." Rabban Gamliel was from an important family, descended from the great sage Hillel. That convinced Rabbi Yehoshua, and the two made up.
7. **Reinstating Rabban Gamliel.** Rabbi Yehoshua went to the Sanhedrin and said, "A kohen is a kohen, and someone who isn't can't be a kohen. Similarly, someone not from the house of King David cannot be the nasi." Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was a kohen. Rabban Gamliel was from the

house of Hillel, descended from King David. Rabbi Yehoshua was saying that we are both a nation and a religion, and it's important to keep a connection to our past. The tribe of Yehuda, and specifically the family of David, was long ago selected to be the rulers of our people, and that tradition should continue now with a descendent of King David as the nasi. Of course, though Rabbi Yehoshua advocated for Rabban Gamliel, he did insist on some changes. Rabban Gamliel could not continue to abuse him, and he would have to keep all the new students who had joined the yeshiva. An arrangement was made wherein Rabban Gamliel was reinstated, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah stayed on in a lesser capacity and lectured every third or fourth week.

8. **Rabbi Artscroll.** When a person enters the study hall, he should say, "May it be the will in front of You, G-d, that a mishap shouldn't happen through me, and I shouldn't stumble in the matter of the law, and allow my friends to rejoice with me." This either means that they should rejoice that I don't stumble, or they should not rejoice if I do stumble. "Let me not make a mistake and say on something impure that it is pure, or the opposite. Let my friends not make a mistake in the halacha, and I'll be happy for them." When he leaves the study hall, he should say, "G-d, I acknowledge and thank before You that You have made my portion of those who study in the beis midrash, and You didn't put my portion as one of those people who hangs out in the marketplace. I get up for the words of Torah, and they get up for meaningless conversations. I work and receive reward; they work and don't receive a reward. I'm running to the World to Come; they're running to a pit with no bottom." If you look at the inside cover of the Artscroll gemara, you will see these exact prayers, with a couple of verses added on. That is because even Artscroll, in creating a translation of the text, sometimes makes halachic judgments. Rav Moshe Feinstein used to say this prayer, and Artscroll often consulted with him. It is likely that the editors asked him if they should include the prayer, and he said yes. However, many poskim hold that the prayer should be said only by Torah scholars studying on a very high level, and not by the average person. Artscroll's customs might not be yours, so make sure to follow your own customs and not to rely only on what you read.
9. **Shemonah Esrei - why 18 blessings?** Every day we are supposed to say the 18 blessings of the Shemonah Esrei. There are different opinions regarding the reason for the number 18. One opinion says it is based on a chapter in Tehillim that contains the name of G-d 18 times. Another says that the Shema has 18 mentions of G-d's name. And a third opinion says it is because there are 18 vertebrae in the spine. My friend and teacher Rabbi Hershel Reichman, who was a student of Rabbi Soloveitchik, was once at The Carlebach Shul for Shabbos, and he shared that a friend of his had given him a challenge: "Do you speak to Hashem during the day? Try speaking to Him sometimes outside of the regular tefillah." Rabbi Reichman admitted that he had never considered doing that before, because he'd always thought that we need permission to talk to G-d. And in a sense, that is true. We are lowly humans, and we only have the audacity to address G-d directly because we have the words passed down to us from the Anshei K'nesset Hagedolah. That is what Shemonah Esrei is all about. It follows a specific formula, beginning with praise, continuing with our requests, and ending with thanks, that we know is acceptable to G-d. However, as Rabbi Reichman realized, maybe we don't need that formality in order to address Him. Perhaps that is part of the novelty of Chassidus - giving permission for people to talk to G-d at any point in the day.
10. **Bowing in Shemonah Esrei.** How should one bow in the Shemonah Esrei, and especially at modim? He must bow enough that all the vertebrae are bending. Rabbi Chanina says his head must go down, but he doesn't need to bend all the way. And Rava says that as long as he puts in an effort and steps a bit out of his comfort zone, that is enough. Bowing down for modim is as important as not being cremated. What does that mean? The Zohar says that one who bows for modim will be revived at *techiyas hameisim*, and one who doesn't bow will not be revived. The

backbone will be used to put our bodies back together when *techiyas hameisim* comes, so only those who use their backbones correctly, by bowing at modim, will be brought back. And this is arguably as important as avoiding cremation, because we shouldn't wait until we die to earn our *olam haba*. We must use our bodies properly in the service of G-d while we live. People tend to be very careful about proper Jewish burials but not nearly as careful about bowing during modim. Some of this might stem from the Holocaust, when so many Jews were cremated against their wishes. But part of it might also be that it feels like as long as we're alive there's always more time to do mitzvot, while burial is a forever decision. The truth is, we never know how much more time we have to live, and we cannot push off mitzvot for the unknown future.