

COMFORTING THE MOURNER

When Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's son died, his students came to comfort him. Rabbi Eliezer entered and sat before him, saying, "Rabbi, may I say something to you?" Rabbi Yohanan replied, "Speak." He told him, "Adam had a son who died and he accepted comfort. Where does Scripture speak of his accepting comfort? As it is said, 'Adam again knew his wife' [Genesis 4:25]. So too, you should find comfort."

He replied, "Is it not enough that I have my own troubles that you remind me of the sorrows of Adam?"

Rabbi Yehoshua entered and said to him, "May I say something to you?" He said, "Speak." He told him, "Job's sons and daughters all perished on the same day, and yet he was comforted for his loss of them. You, too, should find comfort. Where does Scripture speak of his accepting comfort? As it is said, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord' [Job 1:21]."

He replied, "Is it not enough that I have my own troubles that you remind me of the sorrows of Job?"

Rabbi José entered and sat before him, saying, "Rabbi, may I say something to you?" Rabbi Yohanan replied, "Speak."

He told him, "Aaron had two adult sons who both died on the same day. Yet he was comforted, as it is said, 'Aaron was silent' [Leviticus 10:3]. Silence here means comfort, so you, too, should be comforted."

He replied, "Is it not enough that I have my own troubles that you remind me of the sorrows of Aaron?"

Rabbi Shimeon entered and said to him, "May I say something to you?" He said, "Speak." He said, "King David had a son who died and he was comforted, so you, too, should be comforted. Where does Scripture speak of David receiving comfort? As it is said, 'David comforted his wife Bat Sheva, he came unto her and lay with her. She gave birth and called the child Solomon' [2 Samuel 12:24]. So you, Rabbi, should accept comfort."

He replied, "Is it not enough that I have my own troubles that you remind me of the sorrows of King David?"

Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh entered. When Yohanan saw him he told his servant, "Gather my clothing and prepare to follow me to the bathhouse; for Rabbi Elazar is a great man and I shall not withstand him."

Elazar came in and sat down before Yohanan. He said to him, "I will give you an analogy. This is like a man with whom the king has entrusted a deposit of some value. Each and every day that man would wail and moan, 'Oy for the time that I will return this deposit in peace and fullness!' So you, Rabbi, had a son. He studied Torah: Pentateuch, Prophets, Writings, Mishnah, Laws, and Narrative. And he departed this world without sin. You should take comfort that you have returned your deposit in peace and fullness."

Rabbi Yohanan said to him, "Elazar, my son, you have comforted, me like a Mensch."

(*AVOT DERABBI NATHAN A*, CHAP. 14)

WHAT HAPPENED TO ELAZAR?

When they left Yohanan, Elazar said, "I will go to Damasit, a place of beauty with pleasant and beautiful waters." The other four disciples said, "We will go to Yavneh, a place where so many disciples of the sages love the Torah."

He who went to Damasit, the place of beauty with pleasant and beautiful waters, his name diminished in Torah. They who went to Yavneh, the place where so many disciples of the sages love the Torah, their names were exalted in Torah.

(AVOT DERABBI NATHAN, CHAP. 14)

A VALOROUS WOMAN

"A woman of valor, who can find?" (Proverbs 31:10). They told a tale of Rabbi Meir who was sitting and expounding in the study house one Shabbat afternoon when his two sons died.

What did their mother do? She rested the two of them upon the bed and spread a sheet over them. When Shabbat had ended, Rabbi Meir returned home from the study house. He asked, "Where are my two sons?"

She told him, "They went to the study house."

He replied, "I looked for them at the study house, but I didn't see them."

She gave him a cup of wine to pronounce the blessings for ending Shabbat, and he recited them.

He asked again, "Where are my two sons?"

She said, "Sometimes they go to some Place; they're on their way now." She put dinner before him and he ate. After he had recited the blessings following the meal, she said to him,

"Rabbi, I have a question to ask."

He said to her, "Ask your question."

She asked, "Rabbi, earlier a man came and left me something on deposit. Now he has come to collect that deposit. Shall we return it or not?"

He said, "My daughter, is it not clear that one who is entrusted with a deposit must return it to its master!"

She said, "I wouldn't have returned it without your consent."

What did she do? She took him by his hand, led him up to that room, brought him close to the bed, and removed the sheet from them. He saw the two of them lying dead upon the bed and began to weep.

He said, "My sons, my sons, my rabbis, my rabbis! My sons by nature, but my rabbis in that they enlightened me with their Torah."

At that time she said to Rabbi Meir, "Rabbi, did you not tell me that we must return the deposit to its Master? Thus it says, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord' [Job 1:21]."

Rabbi Hannina said, "With these words she comforted him and settled his mind. That is why it says, 'A woman of valor, who can find?' [Proverbs 31:10]."

(MIDRASH MISHLE 31)

THE CRYING RABBI!

A tale is told of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, whose father had plowmen who would plow the furrow, while Eliezer plowed the stony hillocks. He sat and wept. His father asked him, “Why do you cry? Perhaps you are upset that you are plowing the stony hillocks? Now, go plow the furrow.”

Eliezer sat upon the furrow and wept. His father asked him, “Now why do you cry? Are you upset at having to plow the furrow?” He replied, “No.”

He asked, “So why do you cry?”

Eliezer said, “Because I want to learn Torah.”

His father replied, “Look, you are twenty-eight years old! *Now* you want to study Torah? Get yourself a wife, have kids, take *them* to school!”

Eliezer went for two weeks without eating a thing, until Elijah—may he be remembered for good—appeared to him.

He said, “Son of Hyrcanus, why do you cry?”

Eliezer said, “Because I want to learn Torah.”

Elijah said, “If you wish to study Torah, go up to Jerusalem to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai.”

Eliezer arose and went up to Jerusalem to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. He sat and wept.

Yohanan asked him, “Why do you cry?”

He replied, “Because I want to learn Torah!”

Yohanan asked him, “Whose son are you?” But he did not tell him. Yohanan then asked, “In all your days have you not learned to recite the *Shema*, or the Prayer, or the Blessing after Meals?”

He replied, “No.”

Yohanan said, “Arise and I will teach you all three.”

He sat and wept.

He asked him, “My son, why do you cry?”

He answered, “Because I want to learn Torah!”

So Yohanan recited two laws of Mishnah each day of the week, and Eliezer would review them until they stuck. Eliezer went eight days without eating a thing, until the smell from his mouth came to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai’s attention. Then he stood away from him. Eliezer sat and wept.

Yohanan asked him, “Why do you cry?”

He replied, “Because you stood away from me as though I were covered in boils!”

Yohanan said, “My son, just as the scent of your breath has come to my notice, so may the savor of the laws of the Torah ascend from your mouth to Heaven.”

Rabbi Yohanan asked, “My son, whose son are you?”

Eliezer confessed, “I am the son of Hyrcanus.”

Yohanan exclaimed, “Are you not the son of one of the great men of the world! By your life, today you will dine with me!”

Eliezer replied, “I already ate at my hostel.”

Yohanan asked, “And who, then, are your hosts?”

He said, “Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah and Rabbi José the Priest.”

Rabbi Yohanan sent a messenger and asked the hosts, “Did Eliezer eat with you today?”

They replied, “No. It’s been eight days since he tasted anything.”

After that, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah and Rabbi José the Priest went themselves to tell Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, “It’s been eight days since he tasted anything.”

Hyrchanus’s sons said to their father, “Go up to Jerusalem and disown your son Eliezer from your properties.”

When he went up to Jerusalem to disown him, he found a festive banquet taking place honoring Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. All the powerful men of the city were banqueting there:

Ben Tzitzit HaKeset, Nicodemus ben Gurion, and Ben Kalba Savua.

Why was he called Ben Tzitzit HaKeset? Because he reclined at banquet above the powerful men of Jerusalem. They said of Nicodemus ben Gurion that he had three bushels of flour to feed each and every inhabitant of Jerusalem. About Ben Kalba Savua they said that he had a house of four acres of gardens overlaid with gold.

They said to Rabbi Yohanan, “Look, here comes Rabbi Eliezer’s father.”

He said, “Make a place for him”; so they made a place, sitting him next to Rabbi Yohanan.

Yohanan looked over at Rabbi Eliezer and asked him, “Say a word of Torah for us.”

He replied, “Rabbi, let me give you an analogy for what this is like. It’s like a cistern from which one cannot draw more water than what has been put into it. So I cannot say any more Torah but that which I have learned from you.”

Rabbi Yohanan replied, “Let me give *you* an analogy for what this is like. It’s like a wellspring that gushes water and has the power to give forth more than has been stored in the well.

So you can say more Torah than what they received at Sinai.”

Rabbi Yohanan said to Eliezer, “Maybe you are shy in my presence? Allow me to stand away from you.”

Rabbi Yohanan stood and went outside, so that Rabbi Eliezer could sit and expound. His face beamed like sunlight, rays of light emanating like those that shone from Moses’s face, until one could not tell if it were day or night. Rabbi Yohanan came back in behind Eliezer and kissed him on the head. He said, “Happy are you Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that this one’s your offspring!”

Hyrchanus asked, “To whom do you say this?”

They told him, “To Eliezer, your son!”

He replied, “He should not have said this....”

Hyrchanus replied, “He should not have said this; but happy am I that he is my offspring!”

Rabbi Eliezer was sitting and expounding while his father was standing. When Eliezer noticed his father there, he was nonplussed. He said, “Father, sit, for I cannot speak words of Torah while you are standing!” Hyrchanus replied, “Son, I did not come to hear you preach, but to disown you from my properties. But now that I’ve come to see you and observed all this praise, your brothers are disowned from the property, and they are given over to you as a gift!”

Eliezer said, “But I am not as worthy as they are. Furthermore, if I were to desire real estate, it would be up to God to provide me, as it is said, ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and all the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell there’ [Psalm 24:1]. And were I to desire silver and gold, it would be up to God to provide me, as it is said, ‘Mine is the silver and the gold, declares the

Lord of Hosts' [Haggai 2:8]. All I wish from God is Torah, as it is said, 'Thus I love Your commandments more than gold, even fine gold' [Psalm 119:127]."