

Dining with Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua: Two Early Pesach Sedarim in Context

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Chazal, the rabbis of the *Mishnah*, *Midrashim* and *Talmudim*, preserve two stories of *sedarim* said to have taken place during the decades immediately after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. While one is well known from the Passover *Haggadah*, its parallel in the *Tosefta* (a third century collection of *baraitot*), is less known. Read together, these *sedarim* provide an exciting window into the ways that *Pesach* was celebrated and defined in the late first century CE, as *Chazal* struggled to revive our community during the depressing days after the *Churban*, the destruction of the Temple. Their responses have significant implications for our own *sedarim*.

In the *Haggadah* we read:

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining [at the Pesach seder] in Bnei Brak. They spoke of the exodus from Egypt all that night, until their students came and said to them: Our masters, the time to recite the morning Shema has arrived.

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע
ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ורבי עקיבא
ורבי טרפון שהיו מסובין בבני ברק.
והיו מספרים ביציאת מצרים כל
אותו הלילה עד שבאו תלמידיהם
ואמרו להם רבותינו – הגיע זמן
קריאת שמע של שהרית.

The *Tosefta*, *Pesachim* 10:12 tells of another *seder*, this time in the city of Lod.

It happened that Rabban Gamliel and the elders were reclining [at the Pesach seder] in the house of Beitos son of Zunin in Lod. They discussed the laws of Pesach all that night, until the crowing of the rooster. They [the servants] took away [the tables] that were before them and they shook themselves off and went to the study house.

מעשה ברבן גמליאל
וזקנים שהיו מסובין בבית
ביתוס בן זונין בלוד והיו
עסוקין בהלכות הפסח כל
הלילה עד קרות הגבר
הגביהו מלפניהן ונועדו
ההלכו להן לבית המדרש

What do these stories have in common? First off, they portray our Sages coming together in groups to “recline,” celebrate and talk about the meaning of *Pesach*. That these *sedarim* are set in the coastal plain of Judaea, what we today call *Gush Dan*, is significant. With the destruction of the Temple, few Jews continued to reside in the holy city of Jerusalem. Those that did were called the *Kehillah Kadisha she-be-Yerushalayim*, “The Holy Community that is in Jerusalem,” and they surely needed real tenacity to live in a small and impoverished community among the ruins of the once great city. The Jews of Judaea, rabbis included, mainly settled in the towns, villages and cities of the coast—in Lod (Diospolis in Greek), in Yavneh (Jamnia in Greek), in Emmaus (Nicapolis, near today’s Latrun), and in Bnai Brak.

Ancient Bnai Brak was located between today’s *Mesubin* (literally, “reclining”) Junction - named for the *Haggadah*’s Bnei Brak - and Bar Ilan University, and not to the north where modern Bnai Brak is situated. *Chazal* tell many stories of rabbis walking with their students from town to town, and of course, to the assemblies of sages that periodically met in a vineyard in Yavneh.

Rabban Gamliel and his entourage came together in the house of one of the leading families of Lod, Beitos son of Zunin. Lod had long been a large and prosperous Jewish community, and one can imagine that the presence of the *Nasi*, the Patriarch, descendant of Hillel and eventual leader of the Sages in the decades after the *Churban*, was a great honor for Beitos son of Zunin - whose name, significantly, was Greek, as was his father’s. The Patriarch and those surrounding him are apparently reinforcing relations with a member of the patrician class of post-*Churban* Judaea. The meal was conducted in a “reclining” position - the customary mode of seating in wealthy Roman feasts. As was standard to such meals, each person had his own small tray that was placed before him by servants. The focus on conversation at the meal was derived from Roman *symposia* of this age, the assembly in Lod having engaged in lively conversation, focusing on halachic themes. This is no wonder. Rabban Gamliel was deeply involved in standardizing Jewish practice in the aftermath of the Temple’s destruction - everything from the calendar to liturgy to a myriad other areas of Jewish life. He apparently thought that standardization would ultimately unify the community of sages and their followers. Indeed it did, though not without creating anger and hurt egos among the rabbinic leadership in the process. Rabban Gamliel feasted with Beitos son of Zunin, a member of the Jewish communal leadership of Lod, at this moment of tension and reconstruction.

The rabbis assembled in Bnei Brak were nothing less than a “who’s who” of post-*Churban* sages. This group appears together often in rabbinic literature, and in the same hierarchical order. Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrkanos was the senior member of this *chaburah*, this group of colleagues. A student of Rabban Yochanan son of Zakkai, it is said that he “never lost a single drop [of his learning]” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:8). Feisty to the end, Rabbi Eliezer asserted the authority of his positions even against the will of Rabban Gamliel. The same can be said of Rabbi Yehoshua son of Hananyah, Rabbi Eliezer’s peer and fellow student of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. A needle maker by profession, coming from the lowest of classes, Rabbi Yehoshua rose to the heights of Torah scholarship, having been trained for his life’s task from birth, *Chazal* suggest, by his mother, who brought him as a baby to acculturate to the world of the study house (*Pirkei Avot* 2:8, *Yerushalmi Horayot* 1:6). He too found himself in dispute with Rabban Gamliel, most

significantly over the calendar. One of the marks of sectarianism during the Second Temple period had been the calendar, and in fact, some sects, such as those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, lived by a solar calendar rather than the lunar-solar calendar of *Chazal*. *Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 2:8-9 relates that Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel disagreed vehemently over the calendar, and a schism was averted only when Rabbi Yehoshua accepted Rabban Gamliel's authority.

Next in the group was Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah. He had both wealth and *yichus*— a descendant of Ezra, the “priest and the scribe,” this rabbi was both a great sage and a *kohen*. In the great disputes between Rabbi Eliezer son of Hyrkanos and Rabbi Yehoshua on the one side and Rabban Gamliel on the other, Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah is described as something of a conciliator. According to *Bavli Berachot* 27b-28a, his beard grew white overnight—as a miraculous sign of Divine support, though the Yerushalmi has it that he was around seventy (*ke-ben shivim shanah*) at the time (*Berachot* 1:6). Rabbi Tarfon was another wealthy sage, a *kohen* and landholder in Lod. This leaves Rabbi Akiva, who lived in Bnei Brak, the place of our *seeder*. Student of Eliezer son of Hyrkanos and Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva is said to have begun learning at age forty, and attained Torah, fame and wealth only late in life. This rabbinic “Mt. Rushmore” is said to have assembled in Bnei Brak, and in the *Haggadah* illustrate the notion that “even if we were all sages (wise), all understanding, all of us were elders, and all of us knew the entire Torah, it is incumbent upon us to speak of the Exodus from Egypt, and all who increase their discussion are praised.”

What did the rabbis in Bnei Brak discuss? Were these political discussions, perhaps a kind of rabbinic faction meeting of those who were in dispute with Rabban Gamliel? Some have suggested that the content of the discussion was the Bar Kochba revolt, which Rabbi Akiva seems to have supported, though this reads more into the text than is there. What we do know is that Sages are discussing the narrative of the Exodus, the big ideas related to God's redemption of *Klal Yisrael*. This feature is what drew the editors of the *Haggadah* to this particular story. The “students of the sages,” are not included in the deliberations. This was to be a mature conversation among the Torah giants of the age.

Chazal preserve the memory of two very different *sedarim*. The first took place in the house of a Judaeen patrician in the city of Lod, where Rabban Gamliel held court and discussed the laws of *Pesach*, an essential step in formation of our *Haggadah* as we know it. It is not for naught that the high point of our *Pesach Haggadah* is our enactment of Rabban Gamliel's declaration that “whoever has not said these three things has not fulfilled the *mizvah* of *Pesach*.” In the second story, five Torah greats, most if not all of whom deeply questioned Rabban Gamliel's attempts at standardization and the imposition of his authority, came together in the town of Bnei Brak to discuss the great narrative of the redemption of Israel. This latter story is the most familiar to all of us, as we invite Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon to our own *sedarim* each year.

The Rabbis at Yavneh, Lod, Bnei Brak, Emmaus and in other towns and villages of post-*Churban* Judaea were faced with the nearly impossible task of preserving and enhancing Torah so that Judaism could live and prosper for generations to come. At that moment, the Sages gathered,

discussed and argued their unique visions, creating for us a tapestry of texts that preserve the flavor of those often heated deliberations. These two *sedarim* exemplify a decisive moment in that process, in which the giants of Torah toiled and forged *Pesach* for all generations. Rabban Gamliel's focus upon the *halachot* of *Pesach*, and the big ideas of redemption that were discussed in Bnei Brak, are inseparable. They represent the unity of *halacha* and *aggadah*, of law and meaning. While some of our own *sedarim* may focus, with Rabban Gamliel, more on the *halachot*, and others perhaps more on the "big ideas," the ideal of our Sages was the happy intermingling of the two, with "the story" firmly grounded in our life of *halacha*; the legal enmeshed in the deepest search for meaning. This is the legacy of Rabban Gamalel and the Sages as they celebrated their *sedarim*, one in Lod, another in Bnai Brak, nearly 2000 years ago. I wish each of you, and all of *Klal Yisrael*, a kosher and deeply meaningful *Pesach*.

For Further Reading:

On the rabbis discussed, see:

M. Margalioth, ed., אנציקלופדיה לחכמי התלמוד והגאונים (Tel Aviv, 2006), and the relevant articles available at Jewishencyclopedia.org

On the early history of the *seder*:

D. Goldschmidt, הגדה של פסח, מקורותיה ותולדותיה במשך הדורות (Jerusalem, 1969).

S. Safrai and Z. Safrai, הגדת חז"ל: הגדה של פסח (Israel, 1998).

On the world of the ancient Rabbis:

S. Fine, ed., *The Jews in the Greco-Roman Period*, a module of the *Jewish History 101* project of the Center for Online Judaic Studies, COJS.org.