

Derashah: Metzora 5784 - Listen to the Younger Generation!

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Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah

In introducing our mitzvah of re-telling *yetziat mitzrayim* on Pesach night, the Haggadah reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah thought this should be a mitzvah every night of the year, and he was frustrated when he couldn't convince others of this mitzvah, but [Shimon] ben Zoma could convince them. He exclaimed, "Behold, I am like seventy years old!" he declared, "and I could not convince the Sages, until Ben Zoma provided support for this psak with a derashah from a pasuk."

Why was Rav Elazar ben Azaryah's age relevant? And why did he say he was "like" seventy years old? There is one popular approach to this, but I'd like to show two more ideas, including one that is very relevant for our Seder.

Approach 1: Hashem showed that I deserve respect

The popular approach: A gemara¹ records the familiar explanation. At one point, Rabban Gamliel was demoted from his position at the head of the beit midrash, and the chachamim sought to appoint a teen-aged Rav Elazar ben Azaryah in his place. Rav Elazar ben Azaryah's wife protested to him that he lacked the white hair which would mark him as an established scholar, worthy of respect. A miracle occurred and he grew eighteen rows of white hair, which made him appear "like seventy", and deserving of respect.

That miracle took place many years before Rav Elazar ben Azaryah commented on his inability to convince the Sages. Nonetheless, when he couldn't convince people to retell *yetziat mitzrayim* every night, Rav Elazar ben Azaryah recalled the Divine intervention and exclaimed: Hashem performed a miracle to demonstrate that I deserve respect, and yet the Chachamim don't listen to me!

Approach 2: Hashem helped me reach old age

Another version of this story in the Talmud Yerushalmi² also contends that Rav Elazar ben Azaryah received a miracle from Hashem, but it wasn't premature aging. Rather, the miracle was that he survived to *genuine* old age - nearing seventy years old!³ - even though people in leadership positions often die prematurely from the stress of their roles.

Within this version of events, Rav Elazar ben Azaryah remarked that his decades of experience, coupled with the Divine support that had enabled him to live that long, should have given him greater credibility with the Chachamim, and that's why he was shocked that they didn't listen to him, but they listened to Ben Zoma. I have a distinguished career and Hashem's support, why won't they listen?

Approach 3: Why didn't I think of that?

But the Rambam presents an entirely different picture of our story. Whereas both Bavli and Yerushalmi claim that Rav Elazar ben Azaryah expressed frustration with the recalcitrant Chachamim, the Rambam explains that Rav Elazar ben Azaryah expressed frustration with *himself*.⁴ And far from a miracle of aging by Hashem, Rav Elazar ben Azaryah aged himself.

The Rambam writes of Rav Elazar ben Azaryah, "When he was young, he would study and learn and read prodigiously, day and night, to the point that his strength was drained, and he aged prematurely and he appeared like a man of seventy years. He aged willingly, as recorded in the Talmud."

Rav Elazar ben Azaryah's work ethic was legendary, as the Rambam described it. A gemara records that Rav Elazar ben Azaryah believed that approaching Torah with weak commitment would be a sign of disrespect for Torah. He even declared that a student who pretends to amass great learning, but who actually fails to devote serious time and develops only a superficial understanding, will not live long!⁵

¹ Berachot 27b-28a.

² Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 1:6.

³ Rav Elazar Azikri, his Chareidim peirush to that Yerushalmi

⁴ Commentary to Mishnah Berachot 1.

⁵ Avodah Zarah 19a.

Like Rav Elazar ben Azaryah, Shimon ben Zoma excelled in Torah study in his youth.⁶ He is presented in multiple gemaras as a paradigm of scholarship⁷ and exegetic skill,⁸ and he journeyed into the mystical studies of *Pardes* with Rabbi Akiva.⁹

The Rambam explains that at the time of the discussion regarding retelling *yetziat mitzrayim* every night, Rav Elazar ben Azaryah was already senior, while Ben Zoma was a young man.¹⁰ This was why Rav Elazar ben Azaryah was so shocked: he was amazed not by popular rejection of his point of view, but by the way Ben Zoma exceeded him in arguing for that point of view. He declared, “I worked and joined myself with chachamim [to the extent that I aged prematurely and appeared like I was seventy years old even when I was young], and yet I never merited to know the derashah teaching the obligation to read this portion at night – until [this young student] Ben Zoma taught it!”¹¹ So wrote the Rambam.

Our Seder

This passage belongs in our Haggadah for its technical exploration of the year-round mitzvah of re-telling *yetziat mitzrayim*, but the Rambam’s explanation adds a dimension to our own *Seder* experience.

As the Rambam tells it, Rav Elazar ben Azaryah and Shimon ben Zoma present two different models of participant, the former a lifelong denizen of the beit midrash who exhausted himself in study from the earliest age, the latter a youthful prodigy who developed an idea which had long eluded his elder. We need both types of participants at our *Seder*, the experienced and the fresh-eyed, the better to learn from each other and to develop a stronger appreciation of the greatness of what Hashem did for us at *yetziat mitzrayim*.

⁶ Sanhedrin 17b, Horiyot 2b, and see Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura to Avot 4:1.

⁷ Berachot 57b, Kiddushin 49b.

⁸ Sotah 49a.

⁹ Chagigah 14b

¹⁰ R. Elazar ben Azaryah was not the only elder sage to interact with Ben Zoma. R. Akiva was also significantly senior to Ben Zoma when they entered Pardes, as Rabbi Akiva was at least 52, and Ben Zoma was a young man. See Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura in his commentary to Avot 4:1.

¹¹ Rashi to Berachot 12b seems to indicate that Ben Zoma taught his lesson on the day R. Elazar ben Azaryah replaced Rabban Gamliel. This is difficult to square with the Babylonian Talmud’s version of R. Elazar ben Azaryah’s aging, which states that he was a young man when he replaced Rabban Gamliel. Ben Zoma, far junior, could not have been a member of the beit midrash at that time.