Truth and Consequences: A Talmudic Tale on Interpersonal Ethics

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Introduction

Truth is a core ethical value in Judaism; indeed, it is God's seal. Yet, as most people know from their own experiences, the consequences of remaining loyal to the ideal of truth are not always comfortable and often involve sacrifice and suffering. One such talmudic tale illustrates this well. It is worth bringing it together from its scattered sources to understand not only the importance of truth, but the hierarchy of some of the ethical values that compete with each other.

R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus *(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 1)*

Our story involves four main characters, all prominent among the second generation of *Tanaaim* (about 90-130 CE). The chief protagonist is R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, and we are best acquainted with him via a story concerning his introduction to Torah study.

His father Hyrcanus was a very rich man with many arable fields, but his son appears on stage weeping as he ploughs a stony plot. His father tries to comfort him by offering an arable plot to cultivate but Eliezer finds no solace in the offer. He tells his father, "All I want is to study Torah."

Hyrcanus, ever the businessman, is not inspired by his son's career goals: "Please," he tells him. "You're twenty-eight years old! It's time to get married, have children, and take *them* to school." Yet Eliezer is not deterred and goes off to Jerusalem to study Torah with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

Eliezer's brothers are resentful that Eliezer will spend his productive time in the *beit medrash* while they will continue to generate wealth through their work. They therefore encourage their father to go to Jerusalem to disinherit the young Torah scholar. Sharing their disdain, Hyrcanus goes to Jerusalem to make the necessary legal arrangements. When he gets there, he finds everyone crowded around a young scholar dazzling the audience with his erudition and scholarship. Discovering that it was his son Eliezer who was the subject of such acclaim, he reassesses his position and offers to disinherit his other sons in favor of Eliezer.

R. Eliezer declines the offer, proclaiming that he never desired wealth.

I asked the Holy One, Blessed Be He, only that I be worthy to learn the Torah, as it is said, "Therefore I esteem all precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way" (Psalms 119:128).

This abhorrence of falsehood will trail R. Eliezer throughout the rest of his life.

Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua *(Mishna Rosh HaShanna 2:8-9)*

The next two *dramatis personae* are R. Gamliel (successor to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, Nasi and head of the Academy) and R. Yehoshua. We meet them as the court is meeting to set the date of the new month.

Nowadays, we know if a Jewish month has twenty?nine or thirty days by looking in a calendar. Originally, though, the new month was proclaimed by the Court based on the testimony of witnesses who reported seeing the new moon. If they appeared on the twenty-ninth of the month, the next day was Rosh Hodesh; otherwise, the month would have thirty days.

The rabbis were competent astronomers. They were well prepared to examine the witnesses, knowing in advance where in the sky the sliver of the new moon should have appeared. One month, Rabban Gamliel accepted the testimony of witnesses whose description was faulty but R. Yehoshua thought that they should have been rejected. Thus R. Gamliel and R. Yehoshua differed on when the new month had begun. And because it was the month of Tishrei, they therefore had different views on which day the tenth of the month --Yom Kippur-- would fall.

Sensing a challenge to his authority, R. Gamliel ordered R. Yehoshua to appear before him with his walking stick and moneybag in hand on the day R. Yehoshua thought to be Yom Kippur. R. Akiva, sensitive the moral dilemma faced by R. Yehoshua, sought him out and argued that what was at stake was not the truth of the date of Yom Kippur but the integrity of the judicial system as a whole. R. Yehoshua was convinced by his argument that there was a value more important then the simple truth. He therefore R. Yehoshua complied with R. Gamliel's order, and was received by the latter with respect and affection.

R. Eliezer's student Akiva *(Sanhedrin 101a)*

It was characteristic of R. Akiva??the final actor in our drama??to bring people around. He knew he was able to say what he thought had to be said in a manner that made it possible for him to be

heard??and he was bold enough to use his talents in conversation with anyone, including his teacher.

When R. Eliezer took ill, his students went to visit him. He said to them, "There must be great [divine] anger in the world." [Otherwise, there is no other explanation for R. Eliezer's suffering, as he felt that he could not have committed any sin the punishment for which include such pain.]

The students started to cry, but R. Akiva laughed. They said to him, "Why are you laughing?" He said to them, "Why are you crying?" They replied, "Can we see a *sefer Torah* suffering so and not cry?" He answered them, "But that is why I laugh! As long as I had seen our *rebbe* suffer no ill in this world, I feared that, God forbid, he had received all of his reward in this world. But now that I see him suffering, I am glad [because he will receive his full reward in the world to come]."

R. Eliezer understood well the significance of R.Akiva's comment. What seemed to be an attempt to comfort him for his suffering was also a reprimand for his hubris. There was a cause for his suffering, and it was neither divine wrath nor premature reward for his many merits.

He said to him, "Akiva, is it really possible that I have not fully observed the whole Torah?"

He responded, "Our master, you yourself have taught us, 'There is not one righteous man on earth who does [only] good and does not sin' (Ecclesiastes 7:20)."

R. Akiva is prepared to confront even his teacher with the truth, and he had the diplomatic facility to do so in a way that could be accepted. But such skills are laudable only when used in the service of truth, as we shall soon see.

Thus the stage is set and we know our characters well. R. Eliezer will countenance no untruth. He holds everyone, including himself, to this standard and allows himself to be criticized even by his student when it is appropriate. R. Gamliel, on the other hand, will tolerate no challenge. If necessary, even truth must bend to his authority. R. Yehoshua is willing to submit to that authority, even at the expense of his own public persona. R. Akiva too will champion halakhic policy, and he is convinced that his interpersonal talents will enable him to bring others along. Each is ready to play his part in one of the most dramatic of Talmudic scenes.

The Oven of Achnai *(Bava Metsia 59b)*

The curtain rises on our four protagonists as they are arguing whether or not an oven built in a particular fashion can become ritually impure. The majority felt that it could--and therefore should be destroyed so that it not defile others?? but R. Eliezer felt that they were wrong.

That day R. Eliezer answered all of their challenges but he could not convince them. He said to them, "If I am right, this carob tree will prove it." The carob tree got up and moved a hundred *ammot* --some say it was four hundred *ammot*. They said, "One cannot bring a proof from a carob tree."

He said, "If I am right, this stream of water will prove it." The waters flowed backward, but they replied, "One cannot bring a proof from a stream of water."

He came back at them and said, "If I am right, let the walls of the *beit medrash* prove it." The walls started to cave in, but R. Yehoshua stepped in. "If *talmidei hakhamim* are arguing a point," he said, "why are you butting in?" The walls would not fall out of respect to R. Yehoshua but would not straighten out of respect to R. Eliezer. And they remain standing that way to this very day!

Finally, R. Eliezer said, "If I am right, let the heavens prove it." A heavenly voice --a *bat kol*-- declared, "What do you want with R. Eliezer? The halakha is like him in every matter!"

But even this divine confirmation of the truth of R. Eliezer's position was not convincing. R. Yehoshua stood up and proclaimed that the verse "It is not in heaven" rebuts the authority of the *bat kol*. Once the Torah was given we follow the majority rule even if it is incorrect!

R. Yehoshua, of course, was demanding of R. Eliezer only what he himself had conceded long ago: the integrity of the halakhic system is of paramount importance, not the abstract truth of any particular ruling. And, in our story, none other than Elijah the prophet confirms that this is the divine will.

R. Natan met Elijah and asked him, "What was the Holy One, Blessed Be He, doing then?" He replied, "He was laughing with satisfaction, saying, 'My children have defeated me.'"

This part of the story, which establishes the democratization of the halakhic process and the rejection of the oracle, is well known and needs no elucidation here. What concerns us, though, is the sequel to the incident, after R. Eliezer has apparently left without conceding.

The Aftermath *(Ibid.)*

That day they burned everything [that had come into contact with the oven and] which R. Eliezer had declared to be pure. Then they excommunicated him.

R. Akiva was sure that he could finesse this situation as he had when R. Yehoshua had differed with the majority and R. Eleizer could not see past his own self-righteousness. He offered to inform his teacher of the situation "lest someone else go and elicit a violent reaction." No doubt he thought he could help R. Eliezer see the necessity of submitting to the will of the majority and by that set the stage for his return to the community of scholars.

He dressed in black and sat four *ammot* away from R. Eliezer, as required when meeting an excommunicated person. R. Eliezer sensed that something was wrong, and in answer to his question, R. Akiva informed him of the situation.

If R. Akiva thought he had the savoir?faire to either bring R. Eliezer along or at least calm him, he was wrong.

R. Eliezer's eyes filled with tears and one third of the crops of olives, wheat and barley disappeared. Some say the dough that women were kneading soured. Everything that R. Eliezer stared at that day burned!

R. Eliezer might have been wrong, but he sensed he had been wronged --and he knew who was responsible.

R. Gamliel was in a boat and a tidal wave threatened to drown him. He said, "This is all because of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus." He stood up and declared, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, you know that I acted not out of concern for my honor or that of my family, but only for Your honor, that there not be disagreements in Israel!"

The waters settled in divine confirmation that R. Gamliel was right. But R. Eliezer's pain was not settled.

R. Eliezer was married to R. Gamliel's sister, and she understood the situation well. She watched over her husband, making sure that he not add his personal prayers --*tahanunim*-- after the daily *Amida*. She knew what would be the content of those prayers, and she was out to protect her brother.

One day she was diverted from her mission. Some say it was because she mistakenly thought it was Rosh Hodesh (when *tahanunim* could not be said) and some say she went to give bread to a poor beggar who appeared at her door. And whether it was ??ironically?? confusion over the date of Rosh Hodesh or the *hessed* demands of feeding the poor that allowed her to be distracted, when she returned she found her husband saying *tahanunim*.

"You've killed my brother," she said. And at that instant they heard the shofar sound from R. Gamliel's house announcing his death.

"How did you know," he asked her.

She replied, "We have a family tradition that all the gates of prayer may be closed, except the one for those who cry out in anguish."

Truth must sometimes give way to the integrity of the halakhic process. But nothing permits creating unnecessary anguish. R. Gamliel may have been justified in insisting on the rule of the majority, but he had apparently reacted cruelly in confronting R. Eliezer. R. Akiva could not smooth this over. R. Eliezer could not overlook it.

The Visit *(Sanhedrin 68a)*

Our story has an interesting epilogue, one that adds a penetrating dimension to the interrelationship of the protagonists.

When R. Eliezer took ill, R. Akiva and his colleagues came to visit him. He was lying on his canopied bed, and they stood outside.

While the group, as we shall soon see, included R. Yehoshua (who was older than R. Akiva), the delegation is referred to as "R. Akiva and his colleagues," not "the students of R. Eliezer," as was the case years before when the ill R. Eliezer was visited by his students. Here, R. Akiva has organized this visit and we --as will R. Eliezer-- might well wonder as to its purpose.

It was just before Shabbat and Hyrcanus his son came in to remove his *tefillin* [which cannot be worn on Shabbat]. He yelled at Hyrcanus, who left in anger, telling the awaiting group that his father had apparently grown senile.

Hearing this, R. Eliezer retorted, "It is you and your mother who are senile! You worry about a rabbinic violation [wearing *tefillin* on Shabbat] and ignore a biblical violation [by putting off lighting the candles until the last minute when Shabbat itself may be violated]."

Seeing that he was in possession of his faculties, the group of rabbis went in, but sat four *ammot* away from him, as he was in excommunication.

"Why have you come," he asked.

"To learn Torah," they replied.

"And where have you been until now?"

"We had no time," they answered.

Such a feeble response must have angered R. Eliezer, as he quickly retorted in what was something of a curse and not simply prophecy, "I think you all shall not die a natural death!" He was right, and the description of the torturous end these rabbis suffered is incorporated into the Ashkenazic Yom Kippur Musaf.

R. Akiva, however, still seems sure of his special relationship with R. Eliezer.

R. Akiva said, "But what shall be my end?"

"Yours shall be the worst of all," was the curt reply.

R. Eliezer then falls into a lament filled with pathos.

He took his two arms and put them over this heart and said, "Woe to these arms that are like a closed *sefer Torah*. I learned much Torah and taught much Torah. I learned much Torah and yet acquired only as much as a dog does when it laps up water. I taught much Torah but gave over only as much as the brush picks up from the palate. I knew three hundred halakhot in the abstruse area of *negaim* and

no one ever asked me about them! And I knew three hundred halakhot ??some say he said three thousand-- in the area of planting cucumbers and no one ever asked me about them except Akiva ben Yosef."

Continuing to reminisce about a time long ago when Rabbi Akiva was simply his student "Akiva ben Yosef," he recalls:

Once I was walking with Akiva and he asked me, "Rebbe, teach me about planting cucumbers [through magic]." I said a few words and the field filled with cucumbers. He said, "Rebbe, teach me how to harvest them [by magic]." I said a few words and all the cucumbers were collected in one place.

The visitors regain their composure and try to take control of the conversation:

"What is the law regarding *hakadur vehaimus, vehakameia, utsror hamargaliyot, umishkolet ketana*?" [We shall not explicate these various categories here, because their significance lies not in their details but in something else to which we shall momentarily turn.] He replied, "Impure." "And what about the *minal she-al gabei haimus*," they continued. "Pure," he replied. And when he said "Pure," he died.

R. Yehoshua then stood up and said, "*Hutar haneder*. The excommunication is lifted."

The key to understanding the purpose of their visit is found in the questions that they posed. As Rashi comments, these issues are the very ones that divided R. Eliezer from the rabbis in previous debates before the final break over the Oven of Achnai. And the answers he gave here are the very same ones he had given years ago in disagreeing with his colleagues.

Why did they ask these questions? Could they have thought that R. Eliezer, after suffering so much because he "hated every false way," would change his position at the end of his life and adopt a decision he thought to be false? They could not possibly have hoped that he would reject his whole way of life in exchange for lifting his excommunication. And if he did not recant, why did they lift the excommunication? After all, "If an excommunicated person dies while still excommunicated, a stone is placed on his coffin" (Mishna Eduyot 5:6).

It must be that the Rabbis had come to realize that they had erred in the way they treated R. Eliezer. They therefore had come to apologize and lift the excommunication. Indeed, it is not surprising that it was R. Yehoshua, he who had originally urged R. Eliezer to conform, who lifted the excommunication. R. Yehoshua had apparently been transformed by the uprising against R. Gamliel and his tactics.

The Deposing of R. Gamliel *(Berakhot 27b-28a)*

It happened that a student once asked R. Yehoshua if the evening prayers are obligatory or voluntary in nature. "It is voluntary," he replied. He then went to R. Gamliel with the same question and he answered that is obligatory. "But," responded the student, "R. Yehoshua told me it was voluntary." R. Gamleil did not respond but told him to wait until the rabbis come in to the *beit medrash* and sit down.

When they came in, the student asked his question again. R. Gamliel replied as before. "Is there anyone who disagrees," he asked his colleagues. "No," replied R. Yehoshua.

"But," R. Gamliel challenged him, "I heard you said it was voluntary."

"Yehoshua," he commanded (omitting the honorific "Rabbi"), "stand up to face your accuser!" R. Yehoshua stood up and admitted that he cannot deny an accuser who was present and able to testify.

R. Gamliel sat and continued his lecture while R. Yehoshua remained standing ??until the assemblage demanded that Hutspit the *Meturgamin* stop translating R. Gamliel's discourse.

"How long shall we allow R. Gamliel to torture R. Yehoshua," they demanded. And they removed R. Gamliel from office.

This event no doubt transformed R. Yehoshua. He had allowed himself to be humiliated by R. Gamliel because he thought that was what the halakha required of him. It took his colleagues to bring him to the realization that R. Gamliel was no longer acting in support of the system but in support of his ego.

The uprising humbled R. Gamliel and emboldened R. Yehoshua. When R. Gamliel subsequently went to him to apologize, he noted in surprise that R. Yehoshua's walls were blackened with coal, indicating that R. Yehoshua was a poor coalman. "Woe to the generation that has you as a leader," he retorted, "because you never took the time to learn how hard your colleagues have to work to earn a living!"

R. Gamliel manages to mollify R. Yehoshua, and when R. Akiva realizes that R. Yehoshua had in fact been appeased, he offers to go with him to inform R. Gamliel that he was to be reinstated.

In planning this final visit to R. Eliezer, R. Akiva, true to character, must have seized the opportunity to organize a delegation to lift the excommunication ??and he understood that now R. Yehoshua would be willing to go along.

R. Akiva realized that R. Eliezer was too principled to either abandon his position or accept anything other than a fully honest retraction on their part.
We can well imagine R. Akiva mapping out the meeting in his mind. R. Eliezer is eager to teach Torah; that is his whole life. "We have come to learn Torah," they shall tell him, and then ask him about his old areas of disagreement. He undoubtedly will maintain his position, and they will then apologize for tormenting him for his principled stand and lift the excommunication.

But God has a special punishment for those who wait too long to apologize. R. Eliezer had grown mordant for having been deserted by his colleagues --and especially by his close student Akiva. They could not respond quickly enough to his acidic reaction to their visit. When they finally can pull themselves together, it is too late. When he answers "Pure," he dies before they can have their say.

The Curtain Falls *(Sanhedrin 68a)*

One can imagine R. Akiva's response. He had waited too long and his teacher had died bitter, thinking he had been forsaken by all his colleagues and his student too. The gates of prayer are never closed to those who cry out in anguish. Truth is important. Halakha is important. Loyalty is indispensable.

That Saturday night R. Akiva met R. Eliezer's funeral procession as it was going from Casearea to Lod. He was beating himself until blood flowed. He stood to eulogize him and said [as Elisha said of Elijah], "'Oh father, father! Israel's chariots and horsemen!' (II Kings 2:12). I have many coins but no moneychanger to turn them into currency."

Afterword

So ends the Talmudic tale of Torah giants trying to balance the competing ethical demands of dedication to truth, commitment to collegiality, modesty in communal leadership. faithfulness to halakha, and loyalty to one's teachers… a challenge to them and an ever-present challenge to us.

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