

Stories For The Shabbos Table

Connecting The Dots

Nitzavim-Vayeilech moves from a renewed covenant to teshuva to Moshe's final charge. This week we follow three moments where return, accountability, and the pull of a comfortable half-truth played out for real.

STORY 1

The Oven That Wouldn't Listen to Heaven

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא

"It is not in the heavens."

Devarim 30:12

Rabbi Eliezer and the other Sages disagreed about a technical question of ritual purity: whether a certain kind of oven, built from separate curved pieces cemented together with sand, could still become tamei. Rabbi Eliezer ruled that it could not. Every other Sage in the room disagreed.

Rabbi Eliezer brought every argument he had, and when none of them persuaded his colleagues, he turned to signs instead. He said that if the halacha followed his opinion, a nearby carob tree would prove it — and the tree uprooted itself and moved far from where it stood. The Sages answered that no proof is brought from a carob tree.

He said that if he was right, a stream of water would prove it — and the stream reversed and began flowing backward. The Sages answered that no proof is brought from a stream of water either.

He said that if he was right, the walls of the study hall itself would prove it — and the walls began leaning inward, ready to collapse. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked the walls, asking what business they had in a dispute between Torah scholars. The walls stopped falling out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua, but out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer they never fully straightened either — and are described as still standing tilted to this day.

Finally, Rabbi Eliezer declared that if he was right, Heaven itself would prove it. A voice called out from the sky, saying: Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer, when the halacha always follows his opinion?

Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and answered the voice from Heaven itself. He said: the Torah is not in the heavens. Once the Torah was given at Har Sinai, we no longer pay attention to a heavenly voice at all — because the Torah itself already says to follow the majority. The matter was put to a vote, and the Sages ruled against Rabbi Eliezer.

FOR THE TABLE: Rabbi Yehoshua argued directly with a voice from Heaven — and won. What does it mean that even Hashem agreed the Torah was no longer His to interpret for us?

Bava Metzia 59b

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STORY 2

The Man Who Had Only Himself

וּשְׁבַת עַד־ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ

“And you shall return to Hashem, your G-d.”

Devarim 30:2

The Gemara tells of a man named Elazar ben Durdaya, who lived a life so given over to wrongdoing that his name became a byword for it. One day, someone he met suggested, half-mockingly, that he could never truly repent. The words shook him more than he expected them to.

He got up and went out to sit between the mountains and hills, and called out: mountains and hills, ask for mercy for me. The mountains and hills answered him: before we can ask for mercy for you, we need mercy for ourselves — quoting the pasuk that even mountains and hills will one day pass away.

He turned to the heavens and the earth and asked them the same thing. They gave him the same answer — that they too are temporary, and need mercy for themselves first.

He asked the sun and the moon. He asked the stars. Each one answered the same way: we cannot help you, we need mercy for ourselves too.

Elazar ben Durdaya finally said: it seems the matter depends on nothing but myself. He put his head down between his knees and wept, until his soul left him. A voice came out from Heaven and declared: Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for the World to Come.

When Rebbi heard this story, he wept and said: a person can acquire his share in the World to Come after many years of work — or in a single moment.

FOR THE TABLE: Every mountain, every hill, the sun, the moon, and the stars all turned him away. Why do you think it mattered that he had absolutely nowhere else left to turn?

Avodah Zarah 17a

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STORY 3

The King Who Cried Reading His Own Disqualification

מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים בְּמֵעַד שָׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בַּחֹג הַסְּכוּת

“At the end of seven years, at the appointed time of the Sabbatical year, in the Festival of Sukkos...”

Devarim 31:10

Once every seven years, the mitzvah of Hakhel gathers the entire nation — men, women, and children — to hear the king read from the Torah aloud, exactly as Moshe commanded in this parsha. During the reign of King Agrippas, the Mishnah records that he stood to read, though as king he normally would have been permitted to sit, and the Sages praised him for it.

As Agrippas read on, he reached the pasuk in Devarim that says a king of Israel may not be a foreigner — he must be chosen from among his own brothers. Agrippas came from Herod's family, with non-Jewish ancestry mixed into his line, and reading those words about his own throne, in front of the entire nation, brought him to tears.

The people called out to him: don't be afraid, Agrippas — you are our brother, you are our brother.

It should have ended there, a moment of comfort for a king in a difficult spot. But the Gemara does not treat it that way. It records a teaching in the name of Rabbi Natan: at that exact moment, the people became liable for the destruction that would later come, because they had flattered Agrippas rather than letting the Torah's words stand as they were written.

The people meant only kindness. But by softening a truth that Agrippas himself had just read aloud from the Torah in his own hand, they were not being kind to the truth — they were bending it.

FOR THE TABLE: The crowd's words were meant to comfort a crying king, not to deceive anyone. Why do you think the Gemara judged that moment so harshly anyway?

Sotah 41a–41b

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