

HOW MUCH HAVE I LEARNED! HOW MUCH HAVE I LEARNED?

It was erev Shabbat and Rabbi Eliezer was close to the end of his final illness.

Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues, Rabbi Eliezer's former students, came to visit him. Rabbi Eliezer was sitting propped up in his room and they waited in the parlor. Hyrcanos, Rabbi Eliezer's son, entered his father's room to remove Rabbi Eliezer's tefillin before Shabbat. Hyrcanos cried when Rabbi Eliezer would not allow him to remove the tefillin.

Hyrcanos went out and said to the sages: Masters, it seems to me that my father is confused. Rabbi Eliezer called after him: My son, I'm not confused, but you are! You have put off the critical command to light the lamp before Shabbat in order to worry about my tefillin which is not a pressing matter for Shabbat. For the sages have said that wearing tefillin is merely out of harmony with Shabbat; but it is not a critical prohibition.

When the sages realized that Rabbi Eliezer was coherent, they entered and sat down before him—but at a distance of four cubits, for he had been excommunicated. Master, they said: What is the status of a round cushion, a ball, a shoemaker's last, an amulet, or tefillin, any of which are torn? If these casings become impure, do their contents become impure, as well?

Rabbi Eliezer replied: They do become impure. You should immerse them in a purifying pool just as they are. And pay strict attention to these matters for they are major laws neither explicit in Torah nor derived by the sages, but spoken by God to Moses on Sinai.

The visitors continued to question him about matters of purity and impurity, and about purifying pools. They asked: Master, What is the status of this? And he would reply: Impure. How about this? And he would say: Pure. And so he would respond in each case identifying the impure and the pure.

Then Rabbi Eliezer said: I would be amazed if you, the generation's greatest students, didn't earn a death sentence decreed in heaven! They asked: Master, Why? He replied: Because you did not come and attend upon me as students should attend upon their teacher. Then he turned and said to Akiba ben Yosef: Akiba, Why did you not come and attend upon me? Akiba said: Master, I never had the time. Rabbi Eliezer said: I would be amazed if you died a natural death.

Now some say that Rabbi Eliezer didn't say any such thing to Akiba. Rather, when Rabbi Eliezer spoke in this manner to the group of his former students, Akiba's blood ran cold within him and he said: Master, how will I die? Rabbi Eliezer responded: Akiba, your death will be harder than any of theirs. Rabbi Akiba now came close, sat before him and said: Master, then teach me now. Rabbi Eliezer then taught him three hundred laws concerning the bright spot that appears on the skin which the priests must examine and deem the one afflicted either pure or impure.

Then, Rabbi Eliezer raised his arms and rested them on his chest, saying: Woe is me on account of these two arms of mine—two books filled with teachings that are now to leave the world. For if all of the seas were ink and all of the reeds were quills and all men scribes, they would be unable to record all of the Torah—written and oral—that I have taught. They would be unable to record all of the ways that I have attended upon the sages in the academy. Yet with all of this, I have taken from my masters only as much as one who takes water by dipping a finger into the sea. And my students have taken from me only as much as a painting stick takes from the tube. What is more, I derived three hundred laws from the verse, *a sorceress shall not live* (Exodus 22:17)—some say that he said three thousand laws—but no one ever asked me about them except for Akiba ben Yosef. And he once asked me: Master, teach me how to plant cucumbers by magic. I said a single word and an entire field filled with cucumbers. Akiba said to me: Master, you have taught me about planting them; now, teach me about harvesting them. I spoke a single word and all of the cucumbers were gathered into one place.

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, one of Rabbi Eliezer's students, asked Rabbi Eliezer: Master, what of a shoe that has not yet been taken from the shoemaker's last, can it become impure? Said Rabbi Eliezer: It is pure. With these words, his soul left him in purity.

Immediately, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah tore his clothes and cried. Then we went out and said to the sages: Masters, come and see! Rabbi Eliezer is in a state of purity for the world to come, for his soul has gone forth pure. (Avot v'Rabbi Natan 25:3)