

Text Study – “Akhnai’s Oven: Community Decision Making”

The Blessing Before Study

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסֵּק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei Torah*

Praised are You Adonai, Ruler of the universe,
Who sanctifies us with mitzvot and commands us
to engage in the study of Torah.

Please note that God's Hebrew name appears on this page. As a sign of respect, instead of discarding it after use you may prefer to store it in a geniza—a place where printed materials containing God's name and old ritual objects are collected in preparation for ritual burial.

Text to Read

Read this text and then answer the questions that follow. You should break into small groups to discuss the text and questions.

Babylonian Talmud. Bava Metsia 59b

They taught: If an oven has contracted ritual impurity and they cut it into pieces and place sand between the pieces -- Rabbi Eliezer declares the oven pure while the sages say it remains impure. This is the oven of Akhnai.

They taught: On that day, Rabbi Eliezer offered every proof in the world but they refused to accept his view. He said to them, "If the law follows my view, let that carob tree prove it!" The carob tree pulled up its roots and traveled one hundred cubits. They said to him, "One does not prove such things using a carob tree."

He said to them, "If the law follows my view, let that stream prove it!" The stream began to flow backwards. They said to him, "One does not prove such things using a stream."

He said to them, "If the law follows my view, let the walls of the house of study prove it!" The walls began to collapse. Rabbi Joshua reproved them, saying, "If sages dispute the meaning of the law, who are you to get involved?" The walls fell no further, out of respect for R. Joshua but

they did not return to their original place, out of respect for R. Eliezer.

R. Eliezer said, "If the law follows my view, let the heavens prove it!" A voice from heaven spoke, saying, "Why do you argue with my son Eliezer; the law always follows his view!" R. Joshua stood up and said, "Lo Bashamayim Hi, לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא, It is not in heaven" (Deut. 30:12). We do not need a heavenly voice, for You wrote in the Torah at Sinai, "Acharei rabim l'hatot, אַחֲרַי רַבִּים לְהִטָּן, Follow the majority" (Ex. 23:2).

Rabbi Nathan encountered Elijah. He said to him, "What was God doing at that moment [when R. Joshua spoke]?" Elijah said, "He laughed and said, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.'"

Discussion Questions:

1. Why didn't the sages accept the proofs offered by Rabbi Eliezer?
2. If the answer is not to be found in the heavens, where should it come from?
3. What does this text have to teach us about our own deliberations and the decision we are charged with making?