

TORAS REB KALMAN



סיפורי צדיקים

*Captivating stories full of Yiras Shamayim taken from Shmuessin that
Reb Kalman Krohn z'tl gave in Adelpia Yeshiva*

Loss of a Leader, Loss of Opportunity

After the famed Pnei Yehoshua passed away, the community leaders were in a quandary. The Pnei Yehoshua was their *rav*, as well as the *gadol hador*. There was so much to say over, so much to mourn. However, the Pnei Yehoshua had strictly written in his *tzava'ah* that he not be eulogized after his passing.

Torn, they turned to the Noda B'Yehudah, also one of the *gedolei hadar*, to ask him whether or not to defy the Pnei Yehoshua's wishes. Should they conduct the *levayah* normally, with long and tearful *hespedim*, as befit the *gadol hador*, or were they obligated to honor his request?

The Noda B'Yehuda thought for a moment and then returned with his unequivocal answer. They were to conduct the *levayah* with meaningful

eulogies, despite the Pnei Yehoshua's expressed desire to the contrary.

When pressed for an explanation of why he ruled that way, the Noda B'Yehuda responded with one line from a *Tosafos* on a Gemara in Sanhedrin which discusses what happened when Reb Eliezer ben Horkenus took to his deathbed.

When Reb Eliezer ben Horkenus was seventeen years old (twenty-seven according to some sources), he was working on the fields, plowing, when he suddenly burst into bitter tears.

"Why are you crying?" his father, the wealthy Horkenus, asked him in concern. "Is it because the plowing is difficult? If so, I will show you where the ground is softer, and you will plow over there."

Reb Eliezer obediently followed his father to the softer ground and began plowing it, but he did not stop crying.

"What's the matter?" his father prodded. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm crying because I want to learn Torah," Reb Eliezer replied.

Horkenus was stunned by this answer. "You want to learn Torah? At your age? Get married, have children, and they'll learn Torah."

"But *I* want to learn Torah," Reb Eliezer insisted, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"If that's what you want, go up to Yerushalayim. You'll be able to learn Torah there."

So Reb Eliezer went up to Yerushalayim and came to the *bais medrash* of Reb Yochanan ben Zakai. Since he was an ignoramus who did not know a word of Torah, he sat on the side and just

listened to Reb Yochanan say his shiur. Reb Eliezer had a sharp mind, and as soon as he began imbibing the holy words of Torah, he began to thirst for more.

For the next seven days, he scarcely budged from his spot on the side of the *bais medrash*. He barely slept; he barely ate. In fact, he was so busy lapping up Torah that instead of eating regular meals, he would step out of the *bais medrash* for a few moments and eat some grass he found outside.

Without regular food and water intake, Reb Eliezer developed bad breath. The grass he hastily swallowed didn't do much for his breath either, and things got so bad that the other *talmidei chachamim* asked him to leave the *bais medrash*. The terrible smell of his breath was disturbing their learning.

“Why are you sending him out?” Reb Yochanan Ben Zakai asked them, noticing the newcomer leaving at the behest of the old timers.

“Rebbi, this man doesn't eat and has bad breath,” they explained. “It's difficult to learn with that smell in the room.”

“Bring him back in,” Reb Yochanan said. “His breath is beloved to me like *ketores* before Hashem. Why is he not eating? Because he wants to learn Torah!”

Reb Eliezer was brought before Reb Yochanan, and the sage addressed him warmly. “What is your name?”

“Eliezer.”

“And who is your father?”

“Horkenus,” Reb Eliezer replied.

“Horkenus? Your father is a millionaire! Don't you work alongside him?”

“My father would like me to work, and to leave the Torah learning to my children,” Reb Eliezer admitted. “But I want to learn Torah.”

Reb Yochanan ben Zakai immediately blessed him that he succeeds in becoming a great *talmid chacham*.

Indeed, Reb Eliezer ben Horkenus grew tremendously in Torah. He is the only sage in Shas that is referred to as '*gadol*'. Reb Yochanan ben Zakai was the *gadol hador*, yet his is not called Reb Yochanan HaGadol. Abaye, Rava, these were tremendous *gedolim*, but they weren't called *gadol* either. Of the thousands of *tanaim* and *amoraim*, only Reb Eliezer was called Reb Eliezer Hagadol.

Once, Reb Eliezer got into a Torah argument with other *chachamim*. Reb Eliezer argued that the *halachah* ruled a certain way, and Reb Yehoshua, along with others, disagreed.

“To prove that I am correct, take a look at that carob tree,” Reb Eliezer said. “The tree will prove that I am right.”

As he spoke, the tree suddenly uprooted itself from the ground, a miraculous phenomenon.

“We don't accept proofs from carob trees,” Reb Yehoshua said, unimpressed. “The majority disagrees with you, and so the *halachah* is not like you say.”

“The water will testify that my position is correct,” Reb Eliezer said, pointing to the roaring river near the yeshiva. Suddenly, the current reversed itself and began flowing in the opposite direction.

The *chachamim* were amazed, even a little frightened, but Reb Yehoshua held firm. “I don't take proofs from water either. The *halachah* is with the majority.”

Reb Eliezer turned white. “The *bais medrash* itself should prove that I’m correct!” he cried.

At that precise moment, the walls of the *bais medrash* began caving in before their very eyes.

Realizing that in another moment the entire *bais medrash* would collapse, killing or injuring the people inside, Reb Yehoshua cried, “Walls of the *bais medrash*! Don’t get involved in the argument of *talmidei chachamim*! Remain standing!”

In deference to Reb Yehoshua, the walls stopped caving in, but in honor of Reb Eliezer, they did not stand back up either. They remained suspended on an odd angle until the end of the yeshiva’s days.

“What are you trying to do?” the *talmidei chachamim* asked Reb Eliezer angrily. “You will turn the world back to its original state of nothingness just to prove your point? The *halachah* is with the majority; just admit defeat.” “I don’t care if I have to destroy the whole world,” Reb Eliezer said, confident that his position was correct. “I will not give in.”

“Then we will have no choice but to put you in *cherem*,” Reb Yehoshua announced.

When Reb Eliezer heard this, he began crying. Excommunication is no simple matter. Still, he removed his shoes as required by *halachah* and retreated to his home. He remained isolated for years, yet he did not give in. He could not allow himself to give up what he was certain was the truth of the Torah in order to be readmitted into the community.

And then Reb Eliezer got sick, and it was the last day of his life. Although the *chachamim* wanted to do the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, they were not allowed to since he was still in *cherem*.

“At this point, he surely regrets his ruling,” the *chachamim* told each other. “Because if not, he

will die while still under excommunication, and his soul will suffer for eternity. Surely he regrets his obstinacy and is ready to submit to the ruling of the majority.”

And so, the Gemara in Sanhedrin tells us that כשחלה רב אליעזר, when Reb Eliezer grew weak on his last day, who came to visit? Rabbi Akiva and the other *chachamim*. It was a Friday, and they found Reb Eliezer lying on his bed in an open tent outside, the fresh air blowing from all sides. He was wearing his tefillin.

The *chachamim* remained four *amos* away from him, as required by *halachah* since he was in *cherem*. They hoped to speak to him in learning and eventually draw him back toward that argument, to have him admit his defeat and lift the excommunication.

The sun began to set, and Reb Eliezer’s son, Horkenus, approached him to remove his tefillin, since Shabbos was approaching and *tefillin* are *muktzah* on Shabbos. He reached over gently and removed the *tefillin shel rosh*.

Suddenly, Reb Eliezer began yelling at him to leave at once. Shocked, Horkenus quickly backed off. He explained to the *chachamim* that he was afraid that his father’s mind was no longer sound, since he didn’t seem to understand why Horkenus was removing his tefillin.

Reb Eliezer heard his son’s remarks and called out. “You think I lost my mind? You and your mother have lost your minds! *Tefillin* on Shabbos is a rabbinical prohibition, but your mother hasn’t lit the candles yet. Lighting candles on Shabbos is an outright Torah commandment, one that is punishable with stoning.”

“Yes, Father,” Horkenus said soothingly. “Everything is under control.”

The *chachamim* moved closer into Reb Eliezer's line of vision, while taking care to still remain four *amos* away from him.

Reb Eliezer opened his eyes and saw them, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Tarfon, and other *gedolei hador*. "What did you come here for?" he asked scathingly.

Originally, their plan had been to coach Reb Eliezer to regret so that he wouldn't have to die while in *cherem*, but hearing the anger in his voice, they quickly changed tactics. "We came to learn Torah from you," the *chachamim* said. "You are the *gadol hador*."

"And where were you until now?" Reb Eliezer asked.

Stammering, they responded, "Well... we didn't really have time... we were busy... you know how it is."

"You should know," Reb Eliezer said suddenly. "That none of you will die a normal death."

The *chachamim* grew afraid. What a terrible curse, and coming from the mouth of someone as great and as holy as Reb Eliezer!

"What will be my death?" Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of them, ventured.

"You, Rabbi Akiva? Your death will be worse than all of theirs put together," Reb Eliezer said, and eventually, that is exactly what happened. Rabbi Akiva, one of the *asarah harugei malchus*, had his skin ripped off his body, dying the worst death of all the *chachamim*.

Reb Eliezer picked up his hands. "Do you see my arms? My arms are like *sifrei kodesh*!" Placing them over his heart, he continued, "I am covering my heart, just as I covered so much Torah. My *rabbeim* were like oceans of Torah, and I got as much Torah from them as a dog licking water

from the ocean. I licked and licked, and although it is only a drop in the bucket, I licked as much as I could!"

He regarded the other *gedolim* sternly. "You, you are worse than a dog licking from an ocean! You didn't even start licking! You didn't get a lick of Torah out of me! I have so much that I learned from my teachers. You could have come to learn from me, but you didn't."

The *chachamim* didn't know what to say, so they remained silent.

"The only one who once came to me was Rabbi Akiva," Reb Eliezer continued. "Once, I was walking in the street and he asked me to teach him certain *halachos* about cucumbers. I said a specific *shem* and a field of cucumbers materialized before us, enabling me to teach him the various *halachos*."

"Rebbi," Rabbi Akiva began, seeing an opening. "You taught me about cucumbers. What about the *halachah* about Shabbos..."

He began asking various *shailos* to Reb Eliezer, who answered them all. There and then, they discussed many different halachic scenarios. The Zohar says that the *chachamim* also asked Kabbalistic questions, and Reb Eliezer taught them thousands of *yesodos* in kabbalah in *Shir Hashirim*, which is the reason we say *Shir Hashirim* on *erev Shabbos*.

After getting into many long halachic discussions, Rabbi Akiva finally posed the question that had led to Reb Eliezer's *cherem* so many years earlier. The *chachamim* waited for the dying sage's response, hoping he had changed his mind and would at last come out of his *cherem*.

"I stand with my *psak*," Reb Eliezer said firmly, not budging an inch. "I have no regrets. The *halachah* is the way I said, and I will not give in, *cherem* or no *cherem*."

The *chachamim* saw that even on his deathbed, Reb Eliezer would not give in. There was no more they could do. They continued speaking to him, asking him *shailos*, and he gave over so much Torah that fires began coming down from heaven. At one point, they asked him about a specific situation, whether the *halachah* was *tamei* or *tahor*.

“*Tahor*,” Reb Eliezer responded, and with that word of purity, his holy soul left his body.

Standing four *amos* away, Reb Yehoshua saw the *sefer* Torah die. “*Hutar haneder!*” he proclaimed. “The *cherem* has been lifted and Reb Eliezer is no longer excommunicated!”

For although Reb Eliezer had remained obstinate in his ruling to his death, the *kavod* Hatorah did not allow for such an exalted *talmid chacham* to die in *cherem*.

The entire Jewish nation was plunged into mourning with Reb Eliezer’s passing. Although he’d been excommunicated for so long, they understood that they had lost a crown jewel.

That night, someone met Rabbi Akiva running in the street, screaming anguish and scratching at his skin with a knife. “You are not allowed to do this,” Rabbi Akiva was told. “The Torah prohibits drawing blood as a sign of mourning.”

But Rabbi Akiva could not be consoled. “*Kavod* haTorah trumps a Torah prohibition,” he responded, his voice overflowing with a terrible grief. How he mourned the loss of all the Torah he could have learned from the great Reb Eliezer! How he grieved the death of a *rebbe* he had not appreciated enough before it was too late! How he bewailed the lost opportunities that would never be again!

Quoting this Gemara about Reb Eliezer’s last day, the Noda B’Yehuda explained his ruling to the community leaders. While the Pnei Yehoshua had requested not to have *hespedim*, they were obligated to eulogize him anyway. They no longer had the Pnei Yehoshua! They needed to tear *kriya* for the Torah!

How could they not properly grieve the loss of a leader, who would no longer be able to teach them Torah? How could they not fully mourn the loss of the Torah?

The loss of a Torah leader is the immense loss of opportunities to glean immeasurable Torah from his wellsprings. Let us recognize the opportunities to acquire from our *rabbeim* as much as possible, before it is too late.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos!
This story is taken from tape # A28b

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