

What is the Torah like? Rabbinic Ideas of Innovation

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Babylonian Talmud *Chagigah* 3a-b

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Hisma, when they went to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Peki'in.

[Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: What *hiddush* was taught today in the study hall? They said to him: We are your students and we drink your water! He said to them: Even so, there cannot be a *beit midrash* without a

hiddush. [He asked them]: Whose Shabbat was it, [They said to him]: It was Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's week. [He asked]: And on what subject was the lecture today? They said to him: It was]about the [Torah] portion on "assembly." [Rabbi Yehoshua asked]: And what did he interpret midrashically with regard to this?

[They said to him that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya interpreted the following verse]: "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones." (Deut. 31:12). If men come to learn, and women, come to hear, why do the little ones come? In order [for God to] give a reward to those who bring them [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: This good pearl was in your hands, and you tried to conceal it from me?!...

מי שבת של מי? (Shabbat shel mi?):

"Whose Shabbat was it?" There was a division of leadership in the *beit midrash* between R' Elazar ben Azarya and Rabban Gamliel (See Berakhot 28a).

ת"ר מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן ברוקה ורבי אלעזר (ב) חסמא שהלכו להקביל פני ר' יהושע בפקיעין.

אמר להם מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום אמרו לו תלמידך אנו ומימך אנו שותין אמר להם אף על פי כן אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש. שבת של מי היתה שבת של ר' אלעזר בן עזריה היתה ובמה היתה הגדה היום אמרו לו בפרשת הקהל ומה דרש בה.

(דברים לא, יב) הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף אם אנשים באים ללמוד נשים באות לשמוע. טף למה באין כדי ליתן שכר למביאיהן אמר להם מרגלית טובה היתה בידכם ובקשתם לאבדה ממני...

פרשת הקהל (parashat hakhel):

This refers to Parashat Vayelekh in Deuteronomy 31:12, and the commandment to assemble the entire community of Israel once every seven years on Sukkot, to hear the Torah read aloud.

להקביל (l'hakbil): "To greet / to visit." One of the obligations of students is to travel to visit with their teachers on certain holidays (Rosh Hashanah 16b; Succah 10b, 26a, 27b).

חידוש (hiddush): a novel innovation on an element of Jewish law. There is a persistent debate throughout the Talmud between the importance of rote literacy vs. innovative understandings. While elsewhere, the rabbis display a marked degree of temperance toward their use, here in *Hagigah*, R' Yehoshua and R' Elazar are overly enthusiastic in their advocacy

ומימך (u'mei'mecha): "From your waters." Rashi understands this to mean that students cannot speak before their teachers do out of respect. But water is also a common metaphor for Torah throughout the Talmud (Ta'anit 7a; Kiddushin 30a; Bava Kamma.17a, 82a; Avodah Zarah 19a-b; Temurah 16a; Horayot 12a), and Torah is frequently referred to as a life giving substance (Sanhedrin 99a-b).

נשים באות לשמוע (nashim bat

l'ishmoa'ah?): "Women come to hear" (even though they may not understand). R' Eleazar is operating within the Talmud's normative gender boundaries. Surprisingly, Tosafot (12-15th c. France & Germany) on this passage comment that precisely because of this teaching, a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah.

[Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya] also opened and taught: *“The words of the wise are like goads, and those that are composed in collections are like well-fastened nails are; they are from one shepherd.”* (Ecclesiastes. 12:11)

Why are matters of Torah compared to a goad? To tell you that just as this goad directs the cow to her furrow to bring forth food for life to the world, so too the words of Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life.

If this is so, you could also say: Just as this goad is movable, so too are matters of Torah movable. Thus, the

verse states: *“Nails.”* If this is so, you could also say: Just as this nail is diminished and does not expand over time, so too matters of Torah are diminished and do not expand. Therefore, the verse states: *“Well fastened (netu'im).”* Just as this plant (*neti'a*) flourishes and multiplies, so too matters of Torah flourish and multiply.

“Those that are composed in collections:” These are Torah scholars who sit in many groups and engage in Torah study. These scholars render an object or person ritually impure, while these others render it pure; these prohibit something and these others permit it; these deem something invalid and others these deem it valid.

Lest a person say: Now, how can I study Torah [when it contains so many different opinions]? The verse states they are all *“given from one shepherd.”* One God gave them; one leader, said them from the mouth of the Blessed Master of all creation, as it is written: *“And God spoke all these words.”*

So too you, make your ears like a funnel and acquire for yourself an understanding heart to hear both the statements of those who render [objects] ritually impure and the statements of those who render them pure; the statements of those who prohibit [actions] and the statements of those who permit them; the statements of those who deem [items] invalid and the statements of those who deem them valid. [When Rabbi Yehoshua heard this *hiddush*, he] said to them in these words: No generation is orphaned, (i.e. without a leader), if Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya dwells among it.

...ואף הוא פתח ודרש (קהלת יב, יא) דברי חכמים כדרבנות וכמסמרות נטועים בעלי אסופות נתנו מרועה אחד למה נמשלו דברי תורה לדרבן לומר לך מה דרבן זה מכוין את הפרה לתלמיה להוציא חיים לעולם אף דברי תורה מכונין את לומדיהן מדרכי מיתה לדרכי חיים אי מה דרבן זה מטלטל אף דברי תורה מטלטלין ת"ל מסמרות. אי מה מסמר זה חסר ולא יתר אף דברי תורה חסירין ולא יתירין ת"ל נטועים מה נטיעה זו פרה ורבה אף דברי תורה פרין ורבין.

בעלי אסופות אלו תלמידי חכמים שיושבין אסופות אסופות ועוסקין בתורה הללו מטמאין והללו מטהרין הללו אוסרין והללו מתירין הללו פוסלין והללו מכשירין. שמא יאמר אדם היאך אני למד תורה מעתה תלמוד לומר כולם נתנו מרועה אחד אל אחד נתנן פרנס אחד אמרן מפי אדון כל המעשים ברוך הוא דכתיב (שמות כ, א) וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה. אף אתה עשה אזניך כאפרכסת וקנה לך לב מבין לשמוע את דברי מטמאים ואת דברי מטהרים את דברי אוסרין ואת דברי מתירין את דברי פוסלין ואת דברי מכשירין בלשון הזה אמר להם אין דור יתום שר' אלעזר בן עזריה שרוי בתוכו.

Rashi on Ecclesiastes 12:11

In whatever he learns... there is nothing new. He will see only what there already was, which was created during the six days of creation. But one who engages in the study of Torah constantly finds new insights therein, as the matter is stated, “her breasts will satisfy you at all times.” (Prov. 5:19) Just as this breast, whenever the infant feels it finds a taste in it, so are the words of Torah...

פרין ורבין (parin v'ravin): “flourish and increase.” An explicit connection to the first commandment in Torah. Study and the commandment to be fruitful and multiply are also closely linked in other passages (Shabbat 31a; Eruvin 27a; Kiddushin 34a). These are among two acts which the Bavli uses the verb “עסק” (to occupy oneself) to describe fulfilling.