

Eliezer meets Yaaqov

introduction:

The story we are going to tackle today is about that time when Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus met a disciple of Yeshua of Nazareth. The baraita (i.e., a story that was known orally but wasn't written down until much later) depicts a friendly conversation between the two, but ends up with Eliezer being denounced and accused of heresy, or *minuth* (מינות). There are three versions of this story: the shortest is in the Tosafot; then there is a longer one (the most famous) from the Talmud, and the final and longest version in the Midrash Rabbah (repeated in Yalqut Shimoni), each one in different contexts and timeframes, with different details, different nuances, and each one actually depicting Judaism's "current" relationship with Christianity.

Before reading the first version of the story, let's have a bit of context:

background on Eliezer:

First of all, **who is Eliezer ben Hyrcanus?** He was one of the greatest Rabbis of his time, the disciple of the Greatest tanna in Jerusalem: The Ribaz, a.k.a., Yohanan ben Zakkai, and the master of Rabbi Akiva. So he lived from the second third of the first century onwards. He's portrayed as a very sensitive person; there's the scholarly theory that Eliezer ben Hyrcanus may have suffered from some form of autism or a mental issue of similar kind, but the sages wouldn't say it plainly, for it would be an offence to such a Torah giant, so they just dropped certain hints about it: His father was rich and had many ploughmen who were ploughing arable ground, whereas he had his son Eliezer ploughing a stony plot. Why? In one interpretation he's portrayed as a very bad worker, maybe even apparently lazy, while in another he's just incapable of keeping up with the work that his brothers did. Eliezer sat down and wept because all he wanted was to learn Torah. His father then reminded him that he was 27 years old, and that the only way to occupy himself with Torah would be by getting married and sending his children to the Beit haSefer, because he didn't even know how to read the Shema (cf. *Pirqei d'Rabbi Eliezer 1:1*). Eventually he became a disciple of the great Yohanan ben Zakkai.

Physically, he was fine, he even got married. But everything about his personality and sensitivity indicates he was not like any average person. At the same time, this was precisely what made him "Gadol" (great) in matters of Torah. His Rabbi said of his concentration and memory that he was like a "cistern that doesn't lose one single drop" (*Avot 2:8*). His interest for Torah paired with his mental uniqueness, made him a giant, to whom the sages attribute all types of miracles, because his emunah or spiritual purity was such that God answered to him immediately every time he prayed. He was so zealous for the traditional Torah that the sages call him a Shammaite, even though he came from Beit Hillel. He was excommunicated by the Sanhedrin because he was so utterly convinced to be right that refused to accept the decision of the majority. At that time he cried so bitterly that the sages say, the whole world was afflicted, and "every place where Rabbi Eliezer fixed his gaze was burned" (*Bava Metziah 59b*). In the same manner, when the Roman brought him to trial for the case of *minuth*, he cried bitterly afterwards and refused to be comforted. The Torah of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was compared to the Torah at Sinai, it came from heaven. His Rabbi would say "If all the sages of Israel were on one side of a balance scale, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus were on the other side, he would outweigh them all." But the rules of the Sanhedrin necessarily come from earth, so excommunicating him was only with the intention to avoid anarchism (cf. *Bava Metziah 59b*).

the story:**Baraita 1 - Tosefta Hullin II:24**

"It once happened that R. Eliezer was arrested on account of heresy and they brought him up to the bema (במה) to be tried. The governor asked him: Should an elder like you engage in those things? He answered: I consider the Judge trustworthy.

Now the governor thought that he had referred to him – though he referred only to his Father in Heaven – and so he said to him: Since you have deemed me reliable, I also said to myself, would these grey hairs err in those matters? (Surely not!) Dismissed! You are released.

But when he left the court, he was distressed to have been arrested on matters of heresy. His disciples came to console him, but he refused to accept [consolation]. R. Akiva came and said to him: Rabbi, may I say something to you, that you will not be distressed? He said: Speak. He said to him: Perhaps one of the heretics (מינים) told you one of their teachings which pleased you? He said to him: By Heaven! You reminded me!

I was once strolling on the street of Sepphoris when I met Yaaqov from Kfar Sikhnin who told me a word of heresy in the name of Yeshua ben Pantiri and it pleased me. And I was arrested on account of heresy, for I transgressed the teachings of the Torah (*Prov 5:8*): "Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house". For R. Eliezer taught: One should always flee from what is ugly and from whatever appears to be ugly."

commentary:

- **narrative context:** The Tosefta story is placed within the context of the laws for the heretics, in which the dangers of socializing with heretics are taught. Not so in the other versions of the story.

- **Where and when:** It is evident that Eliezer's conversation with Yaaqov took place in a public area, because somebody denounced him to the Roman authorities. He was accused of becoming a Christian (cf. *Pliny, Letters 10.96-97 to Trajan*). This is why after the trial Eliezer lamented to have chatted with what he now considered an heretic. The story doesn't tell how much time elapsed between the encounter with the Nazarene and the trial. In the beginning of the second century, it was illegal in all the Roman empire to create a new religion; only ancient religions were admitted and, in the eyes of both Jews and Romans, the Christian movement was emerging as exactly that: a new religion. In the year 109 CE, Trajan persecuted Christians, and this may be the time of the trial (cf. *Herford*), but the friendly encounter probably took place much earlier, since Eliezer had forgotten about it (cf. *Klausner*).

- **Yaaqov of Kfar Sikhnin:** (יעקוב איש כפר סכנין) Sikhnin is in Galilee; Yeshua's homeland. According to some scholars the author of the story might be trying to identify this person as some of Yeshua's direct disciples in the Gospel: Yaaqov ben Alphaï (*Mark 3:18*), Yaaqov the Little (*Mark 15:40*), or even Yaaqov the Just (*Gal 1:19*). The truth, however, is that it is impossible to identify him with certainty, taken for granted it is not a metaphorical character. The story doesn't tell whether Yaaqov was also denounced to the authorities, so there is the chance they had separate trials. This again comes to show that the encounter between these two and the subsequent denounce are many years apart. By logic, he who denounced Eliezer could not be a

Jew or a Christian; it had to be a pagan who either wanted to hurt him or simply was apathetic towards Jews and Christians. Another explanation why Yaaqov's denounce is omitted could be that by this time he had been long time dead, as we know Ananus executed Yaaqov the Just after the death of the procurator Poncius Festus, about the year 62 CE (*Jusefus, Antiquitties 10:9*).

- **Bema:** The bema or bima (**בימה**) derives from the Greek (βῆμα) and basically means: platform or pulpit, which was used for public speeches and debates. In Jewish literature and in the New Testament it also referred to the seat in which a Roman judge stood to bring about a trial (cf. *Matt 27:19, Acts 25:10*).

- **Governor:** Governor is the translation of 'hegemon' **הגמון**; a Roman judicial officer.

- **Minim:** Heretics; more precisely, those who don't do according to the Pharisees. "Talmudic literature applies the term min (lit. from the outside) to persons who espoused various forms of heresy, including denial of the world to come or resurrection, Gnostic views, or belief in 'two powers in heaven'. In addition, the tannaim designated unacceptable hallakic and liturgical practices, which they believed revealed heretical beliefs, as derekh ha-minut, 'sectarianism'" (cf. *Gerson Scholem*). In the end of the first century Galilee, a follower of Yeshua expounding hallakha could not be a Christian gentile, product of the gentiles who gradually divorced themselves from Judaism after the death of Paul; he was certainly a Jew, a Nazarene and as seen in the conversation, his teachings were pleasant to such a Torah giant of Beit Hillel. It was not the teaching per se what was heretic. In this version of the story the teaching is not even mentioned. It was the mere association with the Nazarene what was considered "heretic", and it was perceived "heretic" only many years later, when the Romans persecuted Christians and when the Jewish hallakha had changed due to Christianity's transformation, because the gentiles had disassociated themselves from Judaism and were creating their own religion and turning Yeshua into an idol. In the Holy Land, the Ebionim and the Nazarenes remained Jewish, but for the gentiles and the Diaspora, things went downhill very fast.

- **Yeshua ben Pantiri:** When it comes to the name of Yeshua, there are variations within the different manuscripts: some manuscripts call him Yeshua/Yesu ben Pantiri/Pandira (cf. *Tosefta Hullin 2, some Midrash Rabbah mms*), some manuscripts render him "That One" (cf. *Qohelet Rabba*) and some manuscripts say "Yeshu of Nazareth" (cf. *Avoda Zara 17a; Midrash haGadol*), which is obviously the one intended and most probably the original reading, later changed for obvious reasons.

There was probably an enticer named Yesu ben Pandira who obviously was not the Nazarene. Ben Pandira was a disciple of Yehoshua ben Perakhia (100 BCE), according to some accounts, and according to others, there was also a Ben Pandira whose father – Pappos ben Yehuda – was a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva (50 to 135 C.E). None of them could be the Nazarene, as Yeshua of Nazareth lived in the very beginning of the 1st Century, which is proven by several accounts, including the New Testament, Josephus and by the birth of Christianity itself. If taken literally, the 'historical' accounts of these characters in the Talmud are absolutely inconsistent and therefore unreliable, so how do we understand its use here, in the case of the manuscripts that opt for this name? Those characters were mixed up and became one in Aggadah (i.e., in legend). To the sages all these characters shared the same soul, so when it comes to aggadah, they are all treated as one "person". The Yesu here is not the historical Yeshua of Nazareth, but an aggadic metaphorical version of the 'person' who is blamed for creating Christianity. There are, however, commentators (like the Rosh, Ashier ben Yehiel), who support the opinion that Yesu ben Pandira and Yeshua of Nazareth are totally unrelated.

In this legend, which contains a historical account about Eliezer, Yeshua of Nazareth is quite clearly the person in mind, at least in the 'Avoda Zara' talmudic version. Yeshua was executed by the time Eliezer was a baby; in his 20s and even 30s he could have met direct disciples of the Nazarene. Many scholars (*the talmudist Yosef Klausner quoting Nietsch and Bleek, for instance, also based on some Christian accusations*) explain that the use of Pandira for the Nazarene may have emerged in oral stories because of the 2nd and 3rd century Christians calling him: "Son of Parthenos" i.e., son of the virgin, which sounded pretty much like the name of the infamous 'Ben Pandira'; or alternatively, Celsus himself - a Greek pagan of the second Century - deliberately corrupted it into "Ben Pandira" (the son of the Panther), being that Pandira was a common Roman name (cf. *Origen contra Celsum ch. 32*). Whatever the reason is, it was transmitted in oral form among the Jews as well.

Interestingly, 'Pandira' פנדירא has the gematria of 345, which equals: משה Moshe and שילה Shiloh. That is to say, a "roman messiah". But in this version, the name is spelled 'Pantiri' פנטירי, which has the gematria of 359; the gematria of 'Satan' שטן, which is the angel of Esav (i.e., of Christianity), but also the gematria in Aramaic of 'Messiah' משיחא, thus alluding to Yeshua's double nature in the aggadah.

● **Sepphoris:** The meeting with the Nazarene in Sepphoris - Galilee - is not merely casual, anecdotic or random; something deeper is being discussed behind the scenes in the story, only for those who are able to dig deeper. Sepphoris in Hebrew is 'Tzippori' ציפורי, a name that derives from Tzippor (צפר) "bird", which is a name for Messiah in the Zohar, and whose gematria (396) equals "Zeh Mashiakh Adonay" (זה משיח ה-ו-יה); "This is the Messiah of Hashem" (cf. *Lam. 4:20*). The same value (396) is the gematria of "David son of Yishai" (דוד בן ישי). This is because the author of the Baraita spelled the name with two yods. It is usually spelled with one yod, as in the Midrash Rabbah version (צפורי), in which case the gematria would be 386 and equal "Yeshua" (ישוע). Therefore, if we ignore the hallakhical case which was added in the Talmudic version (and later altered in Midrash Rabbah), we can infer what's the inner story:

Eliezer was strolling on the street of Tzippori, i.e., he was musing about Messiah, and then a Nazarene named Yaaqov spoke to him about the teachings of Yeshua his master, probably attempting to show him from Torah that he was the Messiah - as the Nazarenes usually did (cf. *Acts 8:35*), to which Eliezer ben Hyrcanus reacted positively. In fact when his disciples asked him if "that man" would have a share in the World to Come, he remains silent (taking for granted an affirmative answer), and then the text says: "He didn't intend to avoid the question, but he never said anything he didn't hear from his masters" (cf. *Yoma 66b*).

Baraita 2 - Avoda Zara 16b-17a

"When R. Eliezer was arrested for heresy, they brought him up to the tribune to be tried. The governor asked him: How does an elder like you engage with those idle things? He answered: I trust the Judge. The governor thought that he referred to him – though he really referred to his Father in heaven – so he said to him: Since I have been deemed reliable by you – Dimissus! You are released.

When he came home, his disciples called on him to console him, but he would not accept consolation. Then R. Akiva said to him: Rabbi, do you allow me to say something you have taught us? He said to him: Say it. He said to him: Rabbi, perhaps some teaching of the heretics was transmitted to you and you approved of it, and because of that you were arrested? He said to him: Akiva, you have reminded me!

I was once strolling in the upper market of Sepphoris and I came across one of the disciples of Yeshua of Nazareth called Yaaqov from Kfar Sekhnia who said to me: It is written in your Torah, You shall not bring the hire of a harlot... into the house of the Lord your God (*Deut. 23:19*) – may such money be used to make a privy for the High Priest? To which I did not reply.

He went on and said to me: Thus I was taught by Yeshua the Nazarene, 'From the hire of a harlot she gathered them and to the hire of a harlot they shall return' (*Micah 1:7*) – from a place of filth (ממקום הטוהפת) did they come, to a place of filth let them go! This teaching pleased me, and that must be why I was arrested for heresy. Because I have transgressed what is written in the Torah (*Prov 5:8*): 'Keep your way far from her' – i.e., heresy – 'and do not go near the door of her house' – i.e., the authorities. And others teach: 'Keep your way far from her' – these are heresy and the authorities, and 'do not go near the door of her house' – refers to a harlot. How far (should one keep away)? R. Hisda said: A minimum of four cubits. For R. Eliezer used to say: One must always flee the unseemly and what resembles the unseemly."

commentary:

- **Tribune:** The Tosefta said 'bema', and here it says 'gardom' גרדום. The judge sat on the bema and the defendant ascended to the gardom to be questioned. This is actually the narrative context for the story: the hallakha about pagan architecture (cf. *mishna avoda zara 1:7*). The language in both passages is historically accurate, but not in the third source - Qohelet Rabbah - which mistakenly confuses the gardom with the bema.
- **Yeshua of Nazareth:** Either "Yeshua" or "Yeshu" the Nazarene ישו הנוצרי appear in the manuscripts (cf. *Munich and Paris 1337 mms*), although the name is absent in some printed versions because of censorship; JTS 44830 reads: "Yeshu his rabbi" ישו רבו.
- **'It is written in your Torah':** The author of this version is obviously drawing a parallel with the way the author of John's Gospel portrays Yeshua when confronting the Judeans, "Isn't it written in your Torah..." (*John 10:34*). The other source in which this form appears is Yalqut Shimoni (*remez 137*) where "It is written in your Torah" basically is to be understood: "It is written according to your doctrine". "They asked to Yehoshua ben Korkhah, it is written in your Torah (*Ex 23:2*), After the majority [you have] to decide". Notice no one of the passages in which this expression appears cites the biblical verse entirely, but it only gets a chunk from it from where the other's person theological interpretation derives.

- **to make a privy for the priest:** Whether this hallakhical exposition is original or invented, there are two things to consider:

(1) This was the type of hallakhical debates that Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was famous for, topics about purity and impurity – tameh and tahor. In fact, the word "tahor" was the last word he uttered before dying (*Sanhedrin 68a*). This teaching could have been created to portray a topic which would be appealing to Eliezer, thus showing that there was nothing wrong in Yeshua's teachings per se; since there were sages who could agree with his perspective. The other option is that Yaaqov knew Rabbi Eliezer, and having the chance, decided to bring this topic to him.

(2) Although the Yeshua in the Gospels focuses on mussar (ethics), in the real life it would be logical that he would discuss and debate the nuances of hallakha (Jewish law), as any other Rabbi of his time. It shows Yeshua's attempt to bring sinners such as prostitutes to do T'shuva, i.e., repentance (cf. *Matt 21:31*), and his reverence for the Temple (cf. *John 2:17; Matt 8:4*). This case, then, would be an independent source recording Yaaqov (a Nazarene Jew or Ebionite), engaging in Torah with Eliezer (a Talmudic sage), and Eliezer finding nothing to worry about, except an opinion on Jewish Law that some Rabbis would disagree with, and some others would agree with. By this time, none of them in the conversation was a "Christian"; in other words, none of them had abandoned Judaism, even though Eliezer was later accused of what they perceived as apostasy, given that Christianity – the main religion that preached about Yeshu – turned, by the time Eliezer was arrested, gentile and anti-Jewish. This is why deciphering the hallakhic teaching is important.

- **to which I did not reply:** This behavior of Rabbi Eliezer is not uncommon, for "he would not answer anything that didn't come from his Rabbi", at least in theory. The silence, however, implies agreement or astonishment, as this is the way the Qohelet Rabbah version interprets it. He himself says he was pleased by it.

- **I transgressed what is written in the Torah:** The Midrash haGadol reads "I have transgressed the words of my colleagues". The vision of his encounter as heresy is perceived in a retrospective manner. When the encounter took place, both were just two fellow Jews, belonging maybe to two different sects but with so many similarities. Keep in mind that when Yeshua died, almost all followers of Yeshua were Jews, and many of them allegedly Pharisees, questioning themselves and debating what to do with the gentiles who were joining the movement (cf. *Luke 13:31, John 3:1-2; Acts 15:5*). When Yeshua died, his direct disciples were observant Jews who worshipped at the Temple, went to synagogue, kept Shabbat and were "zealous of the Torah" (cf. *Antiquities 20:9:1, Acts 2:46, 3:1, 13:14, 21:20*). Even decades later, when they heard rumors about Paul of Tarsus teaching Jews to disregard the Torah of Moses, Yaaqov himself questioned him and told him to take a nazirite vow to prove them otherwise (*Acts 21:18, 21, 24*). In spite of all this, by the time Rabbi Eliezer was brought to trial, the Christian movement had clearly separated itself from Judaism, and its leadership and doctrines were coming from Greek-minded gentiles.

- **keep your way far from her:** From the "zara" זרה, which Rashi renders as apostasy (*Rashi on Eccl 5:3*); that is, disaffiliation from mainstream Judaism, which is what Christianity did. Solomon warns the son to "rejoice with the wife of your youth" (*Prov 5:18*), thus turning the poem into a warning not to commit adultery. But the "adultery" was already beginning to take place in the days of Eliezer, during and after Paul of Tarsus, and by the time of the trial, it had already become a different religion, it led to divorcement. Eliezer's regret is that he hadn't seen it coming, as it happened very smoothly.

● **turning the money from prostitution into the high priest's toilet:** The very verse in the Torah says you can't bring the money of prostitution into the Temple, but here they discuss if it can be used to build a privy for the high Priest. The Midrash Rabbah version would explain later that the money of the prostitute was exclusively forbidden for Qorban (sacrifices), but maybe it could be used for something else. The privy sounds ridiculous, but this was a legitimate halakhic question that needed to be solved: the High Priest was many hours in his service, and sometimes he had to leave the camp and go to the toilet. The privy would be separated from the Temple, but still, it was for the high Priest. "On Yom Kippur he had to remain in the Temple day and night or else incur ritual uncleanness" (*Pinchas Lapid*). Eliezer and many others would agree with this idea, although certainly many other Rabbis would disagree. If we take it metaphorically, the prostitute's money and the privy for the high priest are a very gross imagery of what Christianity's teachings are for Judaism.

Baraita 3 - Qohelet Rabba 1:8

"Another interpretation of (*Ecc 1:8*) 'All things toil to weariness': Words of heresy (דברי מינות) weary man. Rabbi Eliezer was once arrested because of heresy. The governor took him and brought him up to the *bema* to be tried. He said to him: Can a great man like you engage in those idle matters?

He answered: The Judge is trustworthy concerning me. He thought that he was alluding to him – though he only spoke in reference to Heaven. He said to him: Because I have been deemed reliable by you, I considered the matter and thought: Would these grey hairs err in those idle matters? *Dimissus!* You are released.

After R. Eliezer had left the court, he was distressed to have been arrested for matters of heresy. His disciples came to him to console him, but he refused to accept. R. Akiva came and said to him: Rabbi, perhaps one of the heretics explained something to you that was agreeable to you? He said: Yes, by Heaven! You have reminded me!

I once went along the street of Sepphoris where there came up to me a man called Yaakov of Kfar Sekhania, who told me something in the name of 'Someone' which pleased me.

This is what he told me: It is written in your Torah (*Deut 23:19*): 'You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog' – what is to be done with them? I said to him: They are forbidden. He said to me: They are forbidden for Qorban, but might they not be allowed [for disposal]? I asked: Then what can they be used for? He said to me: They can be used to make bath-houses and privies. I said: You have spoken well, and the law escaped my memory at the time.

When he saw that I acknowledged his explanation, he added:

Thus 'That One' said: From the cloaca (צואה) did they come, to the cloaca let them go, as it is said: 'From the hire of a harlot she gathered them, and to the hire of a harlot they shall return' (*Micah 1:7*) – let them be used to make privies for the public. The thought pleased me. On that account I was arrested for heresy. And moreover I have transgressed what is stated in the Torah (*Prov 5:8*), 'Remove your way far from her', i.e. heresy, 'and do not go near the door of her house', i.e. prostitution. Why? 'For many victims has she cast down, yea, all her slain are a mighty host' (*Prov 7:26*). How far (should one keep away)? R. Hisda said: A minimum of four cubits".

commentary:

- **Context:** This third version is the longest and latest of them all. It clearly gets ideas from the other two; notice, for example, how the governor says "can an elder like you engage in those idle things" as in Avoda Zara, but changes "elder" Zaqan זקן for "great man" אדם גדול. In the original version Eliezer was already old when he was brought to trial. In this version we don't know. In the context, the Midrash is just offering a list of independent things that explain the verse: "All things are wearisome" (Eccl 1:8); the first three in the list are "idleness", "profession" and "heresy".
- **Sepphoris:** in this version it's spelled Tzipori צפורי, gematria of 386, which equals "David ben Yishai" (דוד בן ישי) and "Yeshua" (ישוע).
- **Yaaqov of Kfar Sekhania:** יעקב איש כפר סכניא. From the point of view of the Midrash Rabbah, this character was no longer a Jewish Nazarene as in the original legend; he's now fully a Christian or a what we would call today a "messianic" in this version, and so his Rabbi, the proverbial "founder of Christianity", who, although historically speaking was not Yeshua himself, in this aggadah the Christian version called "Yeshu/Jesus" is to be understood.
- **In the name of 'Someone' / 'That One':** In Hebrew 'Ploni' פלוני / פלני. In order to avoid pronouncing the name of Yeshua, who in this version represents the idol of the Christians. Some manuscripts read here: 'Yeshu ben Pandira' ישו בן פנדירא. See my comment above.
- **bath-houses and privies:** The original source in the Talmud Bavli speaks of using the prostitute's money to build a privy for the High Priest, in other words, for doing a tiquon of something evil and turning it into something holy; the hallakha is connected to the Temple service. In this version there's no mention whatsoever of the Temple; and the High Priest's privy has been replaced with Bath-houses and public privies (or toilets).
- **for many victims has she cast down:** The author here quotes Eccl. 7, which talks about the "strange woman אשה זרה... who talks smoothly". While in the Talmudic version the 'proof' verse denoted adultery i.e., apostasy, heresy, in this version verses about prostitution are added and no mention of the High Priest is done.

When taken metaphorically, in this version Christianity is completely foreigner to Judaism; the Yaaqov talking in this version is a Christian trying to use "Jewish" vocabulary to entice Rabbi Eliezer to use filthy money for filthy things; it's even shocking that Eliezer was pleased by this teaching. Christianity speaks smoothly, and at times even uses Jewish vocabulary (as in the "messianic" movement nowadays), in a way that at times entices real Jews and leads them astray. That's the final warning in the baraita. It's evident that people engaging in such idle heresies – i.e., paying attention to their doctrines and taking them seriously – are endangering themselves, and will end up in a place of filth; which is the moral of the story. Again, it must be noticed that this version of the Baraita is a warning against heresy in general, using Christianity as the main example, but it's not talking of the historical Rabbi from Nazareth portrayed in the New Testament literature. The distinction must be mentally drawn in the interpretation of these passages, and then it all makes much more sense.

-Xus Casal-