



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון  
OF NORTH AMERICA שלום הרטמן

## Rabbinic Ideas of God

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## I. Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer

### 1. Ethics of the Ancestors 2:10-11

R. Yochanan b. Zakkai had 5 students: R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, R. Yehoshua b. Chanania, R. Yose Ha-Kohen, R. Shimon b. Netanel, and R. Elazar b. Arach. He would recount their praises: R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus is a cement cistern that does not lose a drop; R. Yehoshua b. Chanania, praiseworthy is the one who birthed him...

He would say, If all of the sages of Israel were on one side of a scale, and R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus was on the other – he would outweigh all of them. Abba Shaul said in his name, If all of the sages of Israel were on one side of the scale and even Eliezer b. Hyrcanus was with them, but Elazar b. Arach was on the other side, the latter would outweigh all of them.

### 2. Babylonian Talmud Bava Meşia 59a-b

... It was taught: On that day, R. Eliezer answered all questions in the world, but they would not accept it from him. He said to them, If the law is like me, this carob tree shall prove it...They said to him, We do not bring proofs from a carob tree. He then said, If the law is like me, the aqueduct will prove it...They said to him, We do not bring a proof from the aqueduct. He said to them, If the law is like me, the walls of the study hall will prove it. The walls of the study hall began to tip, and R. Yehoshua yelled at them: If Torah scholars argue about law, what is it to you? They did not fall out of deference to R. Yehoshua, but they did not straighten up out of deference to R. Eliezer, and they are still titled to this day. He said, If the law is like me, from the heavens themselves they shall prove it. An echo came from heaven and said, What is your issue with R. Eliezer? The law is like him in every situation! R. Yehoshua stood on his feet and said, "It is not in heaven (Deut. 30)!" What does that mean? R. Yirmiyah said: The Torah has already been given from Sinai; we do not concern ourselves with an echo (from heaven), for You have already written in the Torah at Sinai: "Follow the majority(Ex. 23)." R. Natan found Eliyahu and asked him, What was God doing during all this? He answered, God laughed and said, "My children have vanquished me, my children have vanquished me." They said: On that day, they brought all things that R. Eliezer had declared pristine and burned them. And they voted about him and cursed him.

## II. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael

### 3. Babylonian Talmud Menachot 29b

Rabbi Yehudah said, "Rav said ,

"When Moshe ascended to the heavens, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and attaching crowns to the letters. He said before Him ,

"Master of the Universe! Who is staying your hand ?"

He said to him ,

"There is one man man who will exist after many generations, and Akiva the son of Yosef is his name, who will in the future expound on every crown and crown piles and piles of laws " .

He said before Him ,

"Master of the Universe! Show him to me " .

He said to him ,

"Turn backwards " .

He went and sat at the end of eight rows [of students in Rabbi Akiva's Beit Midrash], and he did not know what they were talking [about]. He got upset .

As soon as he got to one [other] thing, his students said to him ,

"Our teacher, from where do you learn this? "

He said to them ,

"It is a law [that was taught] to Moshe at Sinai".

He calmed down .

He returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him,

"Master of the Universe! You have a man like this, and You are giving the Torah through me ?"

He said to Him ,

"Be silent. This is what I have decided".

He said before Him ,

"Master of the Universe! You have shown me his Torah; show me his reward." He said to him ,

"Turn backwards." He turned backwards, and saw that they were tearing his skin with iron combs. He said before Him ,

"Master of the Universe! Such Torah, and such reward !"

He said to him ,

"Be silent. This is what I have decided".

#### **4. Sifri Numbers 112**

“That soul shall be excised excised (=hikaret tikaret): [Why is excised used twice?] Excised in this world, and excised in the world to come, according to Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Ishmael said to him: But there is also another verse that reads: “And that soul shall be excised” – does this mean that there are three excisions in three worlds?! Rather, “excised excised” is simply an example of the Torah speaking the idiomatic language of people.

#### **5. Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael Masekhta de-ba'hodesh 9**

“And all of the nation saw the sounds and the flames (Exodus 2:15)” – Saw what could be seen and heard what could be heard, according to Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Akiva says: They could see what could be heard, and they could hear what could be seen.

### **III. Across the Generations**

#### **6. Mishnah Yadayim 4:3**

On that very day they said: What is the status [of the lands] of Ammon and Moav on the Seventh [the Sabbatical year of agrarian rest]? Rabbi Tarphon decreed: [those residing in those lands must pay] tithes for the poor. And Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria decreed: [they must bring] ma'aser sheini [the second tithe of produce, which must be taken to Jerusalem and consumed there]. Rabbi Yishmael said, "Elazar ben Azaria, the onus is upon you to prove your assertion, for you rule stringently, and anyone who rules more stringently, the onus is upon him to bring proof!" Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said to him, "Yishmael, my brother, I have not deviated from the regular order of the years [with regard to the series indicating which tithes one is obligated to bring each year], but my brother Tarphon has deviated, therefore the onus to bring proof rests upon him!" Rabbi Tarphon responded, "Egypt is outside of the land [of Israel], and Ammon and Moav are outside of the land [of Israel]; just as Egypt [has a requirement that its inhabitants pay] tithes for the poor during the Seventh [the Sabbatical year], so too Ammon and Moav [should require their inhabitant to likewise pay] tithes for the poor during the Seventh." Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria responded, "Babylon is outside of the land [of Israel], and Ammon and Moav are outside of the land [of Israel]; just as Babylon [pays] ma'aser sheni during the Seventh, so too Ammon and Moav [should likewise pay] ma'aser sheini during the Seventh." Rabbi Tarphon said, "Egypt, being near [to the land of Israel], was made [to require the payment of] tithes for the poor, so that the poor of Israel may be supported by it during the Seventh; so too Ammon and Moav, which are near [the land of Israel], are made [to require the payment of] tithes for the poor, so that the poor of Israel may be supported by them during the Seventh." Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said to him, "You thereby are like one who provides them with increased money, yet truly only loses souls! Would you defraud the heavens from sending down neither dew nor rain, as it is said (Malachi 3:8), 'Shall a man defraud God? For you have defrauded Me. Yet you say: Through what have we defrauded You? Through tithes and terumah.'" Rabbi Yehoshua said, "I will thereby respond as to my brother Tarphon [i.e. expanding on his reasoning], although not regarding the [specific] matter of which he spoke: [the decree regarding the status of] Egypt is a new enactment, [whereas that regarding] Babylon is an old enactment, and the matter in question before us is a new enactment; let a conclusion regarding a new enactment be

drawn from a new enactment, and do not let a conclusion regarding a new enactment be drawn from an old enactment! [Moreover, the decree regarding the status of] Egypt is an enactment of the elders, [whereas that regarding] Babylon is an enactment of the prophets, and the matter in question before us is an enactment of the elders; let a conclusion regarding an enactment of the elders be drawn from an enactment of the elders, and do not let a conclusion regarding an enactment of the elders be drawn from an enactment of the prophets!" They [the Sages] voted and concluded: [The lands of] Ammon and Moav must tithe the tithes for the poor during the Seventh. When Rabbi Yose ben Durmaskit came to Rabbi Eliezer in Lod, he said to him, "What innovative idea was there among you in the Beit Midrash today?" He said to him, "They voted and concluded that Ammon and Moav must tithe the tithes for the poor during the Seventh." Rabbi Eliezer wept and exclaimed, (Psalms 25:14) "'The secrets of the Lord are for those who fear Him, and His covenant to be made known to them!' Go forth and tell them, 'Think nothing of your vote! I have received tradition from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his rabbi, and his rabbi from his rabbi, up to the law of Moshe from Sinai, that Ammon and Moab tithe the tithes for the poor during the Seventh'".

## **7. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 8a**

Rabbi Hiyya son of Ami said in the name of Ulla: From the day that the Temple was destroyed, God only has the four cubits of Jewish law in God's world. And Abaye said: I used to study Jewish law in a house and pray in the synagogue. When I heard the saying of Rabbi Hiyya son of Ami in the name of Ullah that from the day that the Temple was destroyed God only has the four cubits of Jewish law in God's world, I began praying only where I studied Jewish law. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi, though they had 13 synagogues in Tiberias, they only prayed between the pillars where they studied.