

The Weekly Daf



by Rav Mendel Weinbach - Dean, Ohr Somayach Institutions

Week of 15-21 Iyar 5758 / 11-17 May 1998

Eiruvim 7 - 13

Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

A Voice From Heaven

The "bas kol" — voice from Heaven — announcing that in halachic disputes between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai the ruling is like the former, twice echoes in the pages of our weekly section. It is first mentioned regarding the beraita which states that one may follow either the ruling of Beis Hillel or Beis Shammai. One approach of the gemara is that this applies even after the bas kol ruled in favor of Beis Hillel, because the beraita follows the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua that no bas kol can influence a halachic decision. Once Hashem told us in His Torah that "It (the Torah) is not in heaven," contends Rabbi Yehoshua, there can be no Divine intervention in the halachic process which is left entirely to the Torah Sages.

The second time we hear this echo is in the statement of Rabbi Abba in the name of the Sage Shmuel (13b). There, a three-year long dispute between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai was climaxed by a bas kol declaring that even though both opinions were "words of the Living G-d," the halacha is like Beis Hillel. If both opinions were so in tune with the Divine Will, asks the gemara, why did Beis Hillel merit to have the Divine ruling in their favor? Because of their gentleness and tolerance, the gemara answers, as demonstrated by their always quoting the opposing opinion of Beis Shammai, and sometimes even stating it before their own.

The position of Rabbi Yehoshua in the first reference has its source in the classical dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues, led by Rabbi Yehoshua, over the halachic status of a particular oven. Although he was outnumbered by his colleagues, Rabbi Eliezer refused to abide by the majority ruling mandated by the Torah in such a case, and called for Divine intervention to prove that he was right. The miracles he invoked in reversing the nature of a carob tree, a stream of water and the Beis Midrash walls did not impress his colleagues. Even when he finally succeeded in having a bas kol announce that "the halacha is always like Rabbi Eliezer," a resolute Rabbi Yehoshua led the opposition by standing up and proclaiming "It is not in heaven" — once the Torah was given to us, we pay no attention to voices from Heaven in regard to the halachic process.

Rabbi Yehoshua's sweeping rejection of any intervention by a bas kol leads our gemara to conclude that he would reject even the Heavenly voice that ruled in favor of Beis Hillel, therefore leaving the option to follow Beis Shammai's ruling. The mainstream approach of our Sages does, however, view that bas kol as the final word in deciding between the two opinions, and the halacha is therefore clearly like Beis Hillel, with no option to follow Beis Shammai's ruling.

If we accept the bas kol in regard to Beis Hillel, asks Tosefos, why did all the Sages — not only Rabbi Yehoshua — reject its intervention on behalf of Rabbi Eliezer? Two resolutions are offered. One is that a bas kol can indeed be considered, but in the case of Rabbi Eliezer who invited Heavenly intervention, it was clear both from the nature of the request and the language of the message that it was intended only as a tribute to his scholarly greatness and not as a halachic decider. The other resolution is that a bas kol cannot upset the ruling of a majority since the Torah told us to abide by majority rule. In Rabbi Eliezer's case he was in the minority but in Beis Hillel's case they were the majority. The only reason a bas kol was needed was to do away with Beis Shammai's argument (Yevamos 14a) that majority rule applied only when the disputants were of comparable intellectual status, but not in this dispute because Beis Shammai was sharper. The bas kol clarified that this was not a consideration, but rather that majority decision must always determine the halacha.

Eiruvim 7a

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Production Design: Eli Ballon

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For the week of 15-21 Iyar 5758 / 11-17 May 1998 (Parshas)

Shaking Words, Shaking Worlds

When Rabbi Meir came to Rabbi Yishmael to learn Torah he was asked:

"What is your profession, my son?"

"I am a scribe" was the reply.

"Be very careful in your work, my son" cautioned Rabbi Yishmael, "because yours is a Heavenly profession. Should you delete even one letter from the Sefer Torah you write, or add one letter, you destroy the world."

Rashi offers examples of how the addition or deletion of a single letter can lead to a blasphemous or heretical reading of the Torah. Tosefos, however, cites only examples of addition but not of subtraction.

Maharsha explains that only in regard to adding a letter is there a need to point out the danger this can bring to the world by allowing for a heretical reading. In regard to deleting a letter, however, there is an obvious danger even if that deletion does not affect the meaning of the word. This is because of our tradition that the letters of the Torah form the sacred Names of Hashem in the way they appeared before the creation of the world as black fire upon white fire. These letters were employed by the Creator in creating His world, and it is through them that He sustains it. The deletion of even one letter of this sustaining force therefore threatens the existence of the world.

Without referring to our gemara, the great Biblical and Talmudic commentator Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban), who lived several centuries before Maharsha, elaborates on the same concept in his introduction to his commentary on Chumash. He utilizes this concept of the letters forming holy Names to explain why a Sefer Torah is disqualified if it has one letter more or less than the prescribed text, even if that letter does not at all affect our understanding of the true meaning of the word. (For example, the word "osam" appears 39 times in the Torah with the letter "vav" in it. Although we would read it exactly the same way without the "vav" because of our tradition of vowelization, the deletion of this letter disqualifies the Sefer Torah. The same is true if one adds a "vav" where the prescribed text does not call for one.)

The black fire on white fire of the pre-creation Torah allowed for reading its letters either in combinations which formed the sacred Names or as the words which make up the accounts and mitzvos we are familiar with. Hashem gave Moshe the Torah to be recorded in the latter fashion and orally instructed him in how to read those same letters as combinations forming the Names. The Divine energy implicit in those letters cannot be tampered with by adding or deleting a single letter, and such an error can have serious ramifications both for the Sefer Torah and the entire universe.

Eiruvim 13a

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