

## Elisha ben Abuya and the limits of dissent

Ruth Rabbah - midrash on the book of Ruth from the Land of Israel c. 500 CE

First printed edition Midrash Ruth, Pesaro 1519, known as Ruth Rabbah since Venice edition of 1545.

Parallels the account of Elisha ben Abuya in Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 15a-b, where he is one of four sages who ascended to 'Pardes'. This gives a(n even) darker picture of him.

### Ruth Rabbah 6:4

ליני הלילה (רות ג, יג), הלילה הזו את לנה בלא איש, ואין את לנה לילה אחרת בלא איש. והנה בבקר אם יגאלך טוב יגאל ואם לא יחפץ לגאלך וגו', רבי מאיר הנה יתיב ודריש בהדין מדרשא דטבריא והנה אלישע רביה גזיז בשוקא רכיב על סוסיא בשבתא, אמרו לרבי מאיר הא אלישע רבך אתי גזיז בשוקא, נפק לגביה, אמר ליה במה הוימתא עסיק, אמר ליה (איוב מב, יב): וה' ברך את אחרית איוב מראשתו. אמר ליה ומה אמרת ביה, אמר ליה, ברך, שהכפיל לו את ממונו. אמר ליה עקיבא רבך לא הנה אומר פן, אלא, וה' ברך את אחרית איוב מראשתו, בזכות תשובה ומעשים טובים שהיו בידו מראשיתו. אמר ליה ומה את אמרת תובן (קהלת ז, ח): טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו. אמר ליה ומה את אמרת ביה, אמר ליה יש לה אדם שהוא קונה סחורה בנערותו והוא מפסיד ובזקנותו והוא משתפר בה. דבר אחר, טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו, יש לה אדם שעושה מעשים רעים בנערותו ובזקנותו עושה מעשים טובים.

דבר אחר, טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו, יש לה אדם שהוא למד תורה בנערותו ומשפת, ובזקנותו הוא חוזר עליה, הוי טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו. אמר ליה עקיבא רבך לא פך אמר, אלא, טוב אחרית דבר כשהוא טוב מראשיתו.

ובי הנה מעשה, אבויה אבי הנה מגדולי הדור וכשבא למולני קרא לכל גדולי ירושלים, וקרא לרבי אליעזר ולרבי יהושע עמהם, וכשאכלו ושתי שרון אילין אמרין מזמורים ואילין אמרין אלפבתרין. אמר רבי אליעזר לרבי יהושע אילין עסקין בדידהון ואנו לית אנו עסקין בדידן, התחילו בתורה ומן התורה לגביאים ומן הגביאים לפתובים והיו הדברים שמחין בנתינתן מסיני והאש מלהטט סביבותיהן, עקר נתינתן לא מסיני נתנו באש, שנאמר (דברים ד, יא): והקה בער באש עד לב השמים, אמר הואיל וכן הוא גדול כחה של תורה, הבה הנה אם מתקנים לי הריני נוטנו לתורה, ועל ידי שלא היתה פונת מחשבתי לשם שמים לא נתקמה בי תורת.

ומה את אמרת (איוב כח, יז): בלא יערכנה זקב וזכוכית, אמר ליה ואת מה אמרת ביה, אמר ליה אלו דברי תורה שקשיו לקנות כלי זקב ונחין לאבד פזוכית. אמר לו עקיבא רבך לא אמר פן, אלא מה כלי זקב וזכוכית אם נשברו יש להם תקנה, אף תלמיד חכם שאבד משנתו יכול לחזור עליה, אמר ליה חזר לה, אמר ליה למה, אמר ליה עד כאן תחום שבת. אמר ליה מנן את ידע, אמר מטלפי סוסי שפכר הלה אלפים אמה. אמר ליה וכל הדא חכמתא אית בך ולית את חזר בך. אמר ליה לית בחילי. אמר ליה למה, אמר ליה רוכב הייתי על הסוס ומטיל אחורי בית הפנסת ביום הפפורים שחל להיות בשבת, ושמעתי בת קול מפוצצת ואומרת (ירמיה ג, כב): שובו בנים שובכים, (מלאכי ג, ז): שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם, חוץ מאלישע בן אבויה שהיה יודע כתי ומרד בי.

ומהיכן היה לו המעשה הזה, אמרו פעם אחת הנה יושב ושונה בבקעת גינוסר וראה אדם אחד שעלה לראש הדקל ונטל האם על הבנים וירד בשלום, במוצאי שבת ראה אדם אחר שעלה לראש הדקל ונטל הבנים ושלח את האם וירד והפישו נחש ומת, אמר, כתיב (דברים כב, ז): שלח תשלח את האם ואת הבנים תקח לה למען ייטב לה והארכת ימים, היכן טובו

שֶׁל זֶה וְהֵיכֵן אַרְיִכוֹת יָמִים שֶׁל זֶה, וְלֹא יָדַע שֶׁדָּרָשָׁה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא בְּצַבּוּרָא, לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ בְּעוֹלָם שְׁפָלוֹ טוֹב, וְהֶאֱרַכְתָּ יָמִים לְעוֹלָם שְׁפָלוֹ אַרְךָ.

וַיֵּשׁ אֹמְרִים עַל יְדֵי שְׂרָאָה לְשׁוֹנוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַנַּחְתּוּם נִתּוֹן בְּפִי הַכֶּלֶב, אָמַר אִם הִלְשׁוֹן שְׂיִגַע בַּתּוֹרָה כָּל יָמָיו כָּךְ, לְשׁוֹן שְׂאִינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ וְאִינוֹ יָגַע בַּתּוֹרָה עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה, אָמַר אִם כֵּן לֹא מִתֵּן שְׂכָר לְצַדִּיקִים וְלֹא תַחֲזִית הַמַּתִּים.

וַיֵּשׁ אֹמְרִים עַל יְדֵי שְׂפָשְׁהִיתָה אִמּוֹ מְעַבְרַת בּוֹ עֲבָרָה עַל בְּתִי עֲבוּדַת כּוֹכְבִים וְהִרְיָחָה וְנִתְּנוּ לָהּ מֵאוֹתוֹ הַמַּיִן וְאָכְלָה וְהָיָה מִפְּעַפֵּעַ בְּכִרְסָה כְּאַרְיִסָה שֶׁל חֲכִינָה.

לְאַחַר יָמִים חָלָה אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן אֲבוּיָה, אֶתוֹן וְאֶמְרִין לְרַבִּי מֵאִיר אֱלִישָׁע רַבִּי חוּלָה, אֲזוּל לְגַבְיָה, אָמַר לִיָּה חֹזֵר כָּךְ, אָמַר לִיָּה וְעַד כִּדּוֹן מְקַבְּלִין, אָמַר לִיָּה וְלֹא כְתִיב (תהלים ז, ג): תִּשָּׁב אֲנֹשׁ עַד דָּכָא, עַד דְּכִדּוּכָה שֶׁל נֶפֶשׁ, בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה בְּכָה אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן אֲבוּיָה וְנָמַת. וְהָיָה רַבִּי מֵאִיר שֶׁמַּח וְאָמַר דּוּמָה שְׁמַתוּךָ תְּשׁוּבָה נִסְתַּלֵּק רַבִּי,

וְכִינּוֹן שְׂקִבְרוּהוּ בְּאֵתָהּ הָאֹר לְשׂוֹרָף אֶת קַבְרוֹ, אֶתוֹן וְאֶמְרִין לִיָּה לְרַבִּי מֵאִיר קָבַר רַבִּי נִשְׂרָף, יִצָּא וּפְרָשׁ טְלִיתוֹ עָלָיָה, אָמַר לִיָּה: לִינִי הַלִּילָה בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה שְׁפָלוֹ לִילָה, וְהָיָה בְּבִקְרָא אִם יִגְאָלְךָ טוֹב יִגְאָל. וְהָיָה בְּבִקְרָא בְּעוֹלָם שְׁפָלוֹ טוֹב, אִם יִגְאָלְךָ טוֹב יִגְאָל, זֶה הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שְׁנֵאמַר (תהלים קמה, ט): טוֹב ה' לְכָל. וְאִם לֹא יִחַפֵּץ לְגְאָלְךָ וְיִגְאָלְתִּיךָ אֲנֹכִי חַי ה' שְׂכָבִי עַד הַבֶּקֶר, וְדַמְכַת לָהּ.

אֶמְרִין לִיָּה, רַבְּנוּ, לְעִלְמָא דְאַתִּי אִין אֶמְרִין לָךְ מָה אַתָּה בְּעֵי אֲבוּךָ אוֹ רַבִּי, מָה תִּימָא, אָמַר, אַבָּא, וּבִתְרַן כֵּן רַבִּי. אֶמְרִין לִיָּה וְשִׁמְעוּן לָךְ אִינוּן, אָמַר לְהוֹן וְלֹאוּ מִתְּנִיתָא הִיא מִצִּילִין תִּיק הַסְפֵּר עִם הַסְפֵּר וְתִיק הַתְּפִלִּין עִם הַתְּפִלִּין, מִצִּילִין אֱלִישָׁע בְּזִכּוֹת תּוֹרָתוֹ.

לְאַחַר יָמִים בָּאוּ בְּנוֹתָיו וְתוֹבְעוֹת צְדָקָה אֶצְל רַבְּנוּ, אָמַר (תהלים קט, יב): אֵל יְהִי לּוֹ מִשְׁפַּח חֶסֶד וְאֵל יְהִי חוֹנֵן לִיתוּמָיו, אֶמְרִין רַבִּי לֹא תִסְתַּפֵּל בְּעוֹבְדוֹהִי תִסְתַּפֵּל לְאוֹרֵייתָהּ, בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה בְּכָה רַבִּי וְגִזַּר עָלֶיהוֹן שְׂיִתְפַּרְנְסוּ, אָמַר מִי שְׁלֹא הִיָּתָה תּוֹרָתוֹ לְשֵׁם שְׁמַיִם כָּךְ הַעֲמִיד, מִי שֶׁתּוֹרָתוֹ לְשֵׁם שְׁמַיִם עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה.

*“Stay tonight, and it will be, in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, he will redeem; but if he will be unwilling to redeem you, I will redeem you, as the Eternal One lives, lie until the morning” (Ruth 3:13)*

“Stay tonight” – tonight you are lying without a man, but you will not lie another night without a man. “It will be in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, he will redeem; but if he will be unwilling to redeem you...” Rabbi Meir was sitting and expounding in the study hall in Tiberias, and Elisha his teacher was passing through the marketplace riding a horse on Shabbat. They said to Rabbi Meir: Elisha your teacher is coming and passing in the marketplace. He emerged to him. [Elisha] said to him: ‘In what were you engaged?’ He said: “‘The Eternal One blessed the latter period of Job more than his beginning’” (Job 42:12).’ [Elisha] said: ‘What did you say in its regard?’ He said: “‘Blessed’ [indicates that] He doubled his property for him.’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘Akiva your teacher did not say so; rather, the Eternal One blessed the

latter period of Job due to his beginning, thanks to the repentance and good deeds that he had to his credit initially.’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘What else did you say to them?’ [Rabbi Meir said:] “‘The end of a matter is better than its beginning’” (Ecclesiastes 7:8). [Elisha] said to him: ‘What do you say in its regard?’ He said to him: ‘There can be a person who purchases merchandise in his youth and he loses, and [he purchases again] in his old age and he profits. Alternatively, “the end of a matter is better than its beginning,” there can be a person who performs evil deeds in his youth and in his old age he performs good deeds.

Alternatively, “the end of a matter is better than its beginning,” there can be a person who studies Torah in his youth and forgets it and he reviews it in his old age; that is: “The end of a matter is better than its beginning.” [Elisha] said to him: ‘Akiva your teacher did not say so; rather, “the end of a matter is good,” when it was good from “its beginning.”’

There was an incident involving me. My father Avuya was one of the prominent leaders of the generation. When he came to circumcise me, he invited all the prominent residents of Jerusalem, and he invited Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua among them. When they had eaten and drunk, some began to sing songs and others recited alphabetical poems. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua: ‘These are engaged in theirs, but we are not engaged in ours.’ They began with Torah, and from Torah to Prophets, and from Prophets to Writings, and the matters were as joyous as when they were given from Sinai. Fire began burning around them. During their actual giving at Sinai, were they not given in fire? As it is stated: “The mountain burned with fire until the heart of the heavens” (Deuteronomy 4:11). [Avuya] said: Since the power of Torah is so great, this son, if he endures, I will devote him to Torah. Because his intention was not for the sake of Heaven, my Torah did not endure in me.’

What do you say regarding [the verse]: “Gold and glass cannot equal it” (Job 28:17)?’ He said to him: ‘What do you say in its regard?’ [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘These are matters of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as gold vessels and are as easily lost as glass.’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘Akiva your teacher did not say so. Rather, just as vessels of gold and glass, if they are broken, can be repaired. So, too, a Torah scholar who forgot his learning can recover it.’ [Elisha] said to [Rabbi Meir]: ‘Go back.’ [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘Why?’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘The Shabbat boundary extends [only] to here.’ [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘How do you know?’ [Elisha] said: ‘From the [number of] steps my horse [has taken, I can tell] that it has already gone two thousand cubits.’ [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘You have all this wisdom and yet you do not repent?’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘I do not have the strength.’ [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘Why?’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘I was riding my horse and sauntering behind a synagogue on Yom Kippur that coincided with Shabbat, and I heard a divine voice thundering and saying: “Repent wayward children” (Jeremiah 3:22), “Return to Me and I will return to you” (Malachi 3:7), except for Elisha ben Avuya, who was aware of My might but rebelled against Me.’

**From where did he adopt this course of action? They said: One time, he was sitting and studying in the Geinosar Valley and he saw a certain person who climbed to the top of a palm tree and took the mother bird and the fledglings, and he climbed down unharmed. After Shabbat, he saw a certain person who climbed to the top of a palm tree, took the fledglings and sent away the mother bird. He climbed down and was bitten by a snake and died. [Elisha] said: ‘It is written: “Send away the mother and take the fledglings for yourself, so it will be good for you and you will prolong your days” (Deuteronomy 22:7). Where is the goodness for this one? Where are the prolonged days for this one?’ But he did not know that Rabbi Akiva had publicly expounded on it: “So it will be good for you,” in the world that is entirely good; “and you will prolong your days,” in the world that is entirely long.**

**Some say, it was because he saw the tongue of Rabbi Yehuda the baker in the mouth of a dog. He said: ‘If for the tongue that toiled in Torah all his days it is so, for a tongue that does not know and does not toil in Torah, all the more so.’ He said: ‘If so, there is no reward given to the righteous and no revival of the dead.’** Some say, it was because when his mother was pregnant with him, she passed houses of idol worship. She smelled [the offering they had sacrificed in their idolatrous rite] and they gave her from that food and she ate it. It was seething in her stomach like the venom of a serpent.

Years passed and Elisha ben Avuya fell ill. They came and said to Rabbi Meir: ‘Elisha your teacher is ill.’ He went to him. [Rabbi Meir] said to him: ‘Repent.’ [Elisha] said to him: ‘Is [repentance] accepted even in such [circumstances]?’ Rabbi Meir said to him: ‘But is it not written: “You turn man to contrition [daka] [and say: Return, son of man]” (Psalms 90:3) – until his soul is crushed?’ At that moment Elisha ben Avuya cried, and he died. Rabbi Meir was joyful. He said: ‘It appears that my teacher departed in repentance.’

**When they buried him, fire came to burn his grave. They came and said to Rabbi Meir: ‘The grave of your teacher is burning.’ He emerged and spread his garment over it. [Rabbi Meir] said to [Elisha]: “Stay tonight,” (Ruth 3:13) in this world that is entirely night. “It will be in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, he will redeem” (Ruth 3:13). “It will be in the morning,” – in the world that is entirely good. “If he will redeem you, good, he will redeem,” – this is the Holy One blessed be He, as it is stated: “The Lord is good to all” (Psalms 145:9). “But if he will be unwilling to redeem you, I will redeem you, as the Lord lives, lie until the morning” (Ruth 3:13). [The fire] subsided.**

They said to [Rabbi Meir]: ‘Our teacher, in the World to Come, if they say to you: What do you request, your father or your teacher, what will you say?’ [Rabbi Meir] said: ‘My father

and then my teacher.' They said to him: 'Will they listen to you?' He said: 'Is it not a mishnah: "One may rescue the casing of a scroll with the scroll, and the casing of phylacteries with the phylacteries" (Shabbat 16:1)? They will rescue Elisha due to the merit of his Torah.' Years later, [Elisha's] daughters came and demanded charity from Rabbeinu. He said: "Let no one extend kindness to him; and let no one be gracious to his orphans" (Psalms 109:12). They said: 'Rabbi, do not look at his actions, look at his Torah.' At that moment, Rabbi wept and decreed that they should be supported. If one whose Torah was not for the sake of Heaven produced such, one whose Torah is for the sake of Heaven, all the more so.

From: *As a Driven Leaf*  
by Milton Steinberg

#### EPILOGUE

On a night of angry winds and dripping rain, two peasants brought the news to Meir.

"Rabbi, Elisha's grave has been struck by lightning."

Shadows danced along the wall as the west wind blew in through the open door and shook the lamplight. The little room, chill with winter, was suddenly colder.

Meir turned to Beruthah, asking a silent question.

Fleeting, her eyes came alive with pain. She nodded her head and looked away.

Meir picked up his cloak, threw it about his shoulders and left the house. Their bodies hunched against the gale, the three men made their way through the streets of the sleeping village, passing the darkened synagogue and the sprawling buildings of the Academy, where in one window a lone light burned, throwing a splash of yellow luminosity across the wet cobblestones. Like shadows they moved. Like wraiths, memories haunted Meir: the message from Elisha saying that he was mortally ill in Caesarea; the room where he lay dead, his body attended by a palsied old Greek called Nicholas; the long slow journey back to Galilee; and the hours of coaxing before the authorities would allow him to be interred even outside the sacred confines of the town's cemetery.

Meantime, they left the city behind them and, reaching the crest of a bleak hill, stopped to peer through the gloom.

One of the men clutched Meir's arm.

"See, Rabbi," he whispered, pointing ahead, "there it is."

From a mound a column of smoke rose uncertainly into the darkness.

Overawed, the peasants would go no farther. Alone, Meir came to the side of the grave and looked down. A bolt of

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lightning had struck the place. A piece of wood, either the marker or a fragment of the coffin, hissed as it smoldered.

"Come back, Rabbi," one of the peasants called. "It is no man from God, a judgment on the heretic!"

Unhearing, unresponding, Meir contemplated his master's resting place. Long since the season's rains had gullied it. Now the lightning had broken it open altogether. He must return and tend it, he thought. But he could not bear to leave him, even until dawn, so exposed to the elements.

Slowly, as in a trance, he slipped his cloak from his shoulders and draped it like a blanket over the spot.

"Sleep through the night," he prayed, quoting the words of Ben to another tired traveler.

Then he bethought himself of the poor shattered body before him, and of the weary search that had worn it into death. He recalled its beauty in youth, and set against it its likeness in old age, black hair turned white, eyes burned out like ashes, a face drawn with despair and lips too tired and too discouraged to speak. He wept silently, the tears streaming down his cheeks to mingle with the rain that beat upon them.

Thunder roiled in the misty vault of the heavens. From the cemetery down the hill, from the grave at his feet and from out dead yesterdays' ghosts came stealing. And he wept not alone for his master, but for himself as well, for a woman who rarely smiled, for sweet children who slept near by, for a people crushed and persecuted, for all the sons of men, their aches of the body and soul, and their dreams that die.

THE END

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