

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHERE DO I RANK? A STORY OF INTRIGUE, PART TWO

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In our last study passage, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan were in a power struggle with Rabban Gamliel. Rabban Gamliel had ruled that no one should stand to honor Rabbi Natan or Rabbi Meir when they entered the Academy. As you can imagine, they weren't about to take that lying down...

The next day when they came in and saw that the people did not stand before them as they used to do, they said: What's this? They said to them: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel has ruled that the people should not stand for you. Said Rabbi Meir to Rabbi Natan: I am the Hakham and you are the Av Beit Din, let us make a ruling that will overthrow Rabban Gamliel's ruling.

How shall we do this to him? Let us say to him: Expound Uktsin (the most difficult tractate in the Mishnah) and it will become apparent that he doesn't know it. When it becomes apparent that he cannot teach this tractate, we will then depose him and I shall become the Av Beit Din and you shall become the Nasi.

Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshei overheard this and said: Perhaps, God forbid, this mortifying thing will come to pass. To prevent Rabban Gamliel from being embarrassed by this situation Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshei went and sat in Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's attic and explained tractate Uktsin out loud, repeating it again and again so that Rabban Gamliel could hear the information. Rabban Gamliel said: What is before me here? Perhaps, God forbid, there is something afoot in the Academy related to tractate Uktsin. He concentrated and became able to interpret tractate Uktsin.

The next day Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan said to him Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: Let the Master come and repeat the material in tractate Uktsin. Rabban Gamliel began and spoke repeating the things he had overheard Rabbi Yaakov ben Karshei saying. After he finished explaining tractate Uktsin, Rabban Gamliel said to Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan: If I had not learned about this tractate you would have embarrassed me. He gave a command and they were taken out of the Academy. (B. Horayot 13b)

Discussion Questions:

1. There are many stories that not only seem to suggest that Rabban Gamliel is not the most learned or quick-witted of the sages but that he can be somewhat heavy-handed in his running of the Academy. What is to be done when a leader may not have all the qualifications for the job but cannot be taken out of the picture?
2. Why did Rabbi Meir's and Rabbi Natan's plan backfire? How are they the architects of their own defeat? Is there a spiritual and political lesson here?