Lighting Up the Night
The Revolutionary Mandate of a Rabbinic Coup

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Of the countless stories in rabbinic literature, few so openly announce their critical importance as that of the story in Talmud Bavli Berakhot 27b–28a of the “rabbinic coup.” This event led to the end of Rabban Gamliel’s tenure as head of the beit midrash in Yavne around the year 100 CE (30 years after the destruction of the Second Temple). We are told that even centuries after this occurred, when a rabbi mentioned “that day,” he was referring not to the day of the Exodus, nor the day of the Revelation at Sinai, but rather to the day on which Rabban Gamliel had been removed. Why is this event so important? Through a close reading of the story as it is presented in the Talmud, I believe we will gain an understanding of the significance of that day both for the Yavne community and for Jewish history as whole.

What is so mysterious and fascinating about this story is that its catalyst is a seemingly routine halakhic debate about whether one is obligated to pray Ma’ariv (the evening service). Few commentators have analyzed this debate as integral to the story. I intend to go down that path, but first let’s look at the text itself. For the purpose of brevity, I present here an edited version:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות כז
Our rabbis taught: A story is told of a student who came before R. Yehoshua and asked him, “Is Ma’ariv optional (reshut) or obligatory?” He replied, “It is reshut.” He then came before Rabban Gamliel and asked him the same question. He replied, “It is obligatory.” He thereupon said to him, “But R. Yehoshua has told me that it is reshut!” Rabban Gamliel said to him, “Wait until the shield bearers [i.e. rabbis] enter the beit midrash.” When the shield-bearers had assembled… Rabban Gamliel said to R. Yehoshua, “It has been reported to me in your name, Yehoshua, that Ma’ariv is reshut. Yehoshua, stand up.”… Rabban Gamliel sat and continued teaching while R. Yehoshua remained standing, until all those present began to murmur and cried to Khutzpit the Interpreter [who would project Rabban Gamliel’s class to the back of the room], “Stop!” and he stopped. They then said [to one another] “How long is Rabban Gamliel going to continue insulting R. Yehoshua? Last year he insulted him on the question of Rosh Hashanah… and here again he has insulted him. Come, let us remove him from his post!”

A yet unidentified student commits the ultimate offense by asking two rabbis the same question. Is a Jew obligated to pray Ma’ariv or is it reshut (voluntary/optional)? Unsurprisingly, he receives two different answers. Rabban Gamliel believes it to be obligatory, while R. Yehoshua proclaims it to be reshut.

At this point in the story, Rabban Gamliel becomes disturbed and even angry that R. Yehoshua is going around preaching the gospel of the optional Ma’ariv. As the story has already made clear, this is not the first time Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua have had a difference of opinion. Why is it specifically this disagreement that leads to a dramatic (dare I say, nasty) confrontation between these great rabbis of the first century?

Rabban Gamliel is so troubled by R. Yehoshua’s opinion that he decides to embarrass him in public by forcing him to continue to stand during the lecture, a rabbinic version of “go stand in the corner.” This provokes the students present to turn on Rabban Gamliel and a coup takes place in the beit midrash!

[1] In fact, at first glance, relative to the other incidents, the “Ma’ariv debate” is innocuous. We’re told of the time R. Yehoshua declared the month of Tishrei to have begun on a different day than Rabban Gamliel had specified. To demonstrate R. Yehoshua’s submission, Rabban Gamliel forces R. Yehoshua to visit him on “R. Yehoshua’s Yom Kippur.” Compelling R. Yehoshua to violate his own Yom Kippur would seem to far outweigh the severity of Ma’ariv’s precise level of halakhic obligation. See Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:9.
Talmud Bavli Berakhot 27b-28a

Whom shall we appoint in his stead?... Let us appoint R. Elazar b. Azaryah... They went to him and asked, “Would you agree to become the head of the yeshivah?” He replied, “I will first go and take counsel with the members of my household.” He went and consulted his wife, and she said to him... “You have no white hair!” That day he was eighteen years of age; but a miracle took place, and eighteen rows of hair turned white. That is why R. Elazar b. Azaryah once remarked “I am like seventy years old,” and he did not [simply] state “seventy years old.”

It was taught: On that day the guard was removed [from the entrance of the beit midrash] and permission was given to all students who wished to enter. For Rabban Gamaliel had [previously] issued a policy that any student whose inner character did not correspond to their outer character could not enter the beit midrash. On that day many benches were added... There is a difference of opinion on this matter... some say that four hundred benches were added, and others say seven hundred...

The coup having been concluded, the beit midrash of Yavne chooses R. Elazar b. Azaryah to be Rabban Gamliel’s successor. The new head of the beit midrash, R. Elazar b. Azaryah, makes a dramatic decision that will change the face of not only this beit midrash, but, as we shall see, of Judaism itself. He opens the doors. What was once an exclusive place of learning, a “Harvard” of sorts open only to those deemed the best and the brightest by Rabban Gamliel, is now open to any Jew who wishes to take part in the learning and elucidation of Torah. Jewish life, which was once defined by the hyper-hierarchical Temple in Jerusalem, is being flattened. Whereas the detailed demands of Temple ritual necessitate the presence of highly trained individuals, the study of a book is open to anyone with curiosity and opinions.

The doors are swung open and the beit midrash is flooded with hundreds of students who were denied entrance during the reign of Rabban Gamliel. The study hall is overwhelmed by the flood of new voices and new ideas. A frenzy of halakhic debates, the likes of which had never been seen before, breaks out. A new era in Jewish history has begun. Temple Judaism is dead, Talmudic Judaism has been born.
It was taught: [All of Mishnah] Eduyot was formulated on that day and wherever the expression “on that day” is used, it refers to that day. And any halakhah whose meaning was not fully understood in the beit midrash was fully elucidated on that day…

Here we come to the climax of the story. The gates are open. All who wish to enter may enter. The influx of new voices leads to an unprecedented level of learning. At this very moment, in the midst of this explosion of intellectual frenzy, a newcomer enters. But not just any newcomer, a convert, and not just any convert, an Ammonite Convert. Here we have the ultimate litmus test to see how inclusive the open doors of this beit midrash really are.

We taught: On that day Yehudah, an Ammonite convert, came before them in the beit midrash. He said to them, “Am I permitted to enter the community.” Rabban Gamliel said to him, “You are forbidden to enter the community.” R. Yehoshua said to him, “You are permitted to enter the community.” Said Rabban Gamaliel to him, “Does the Torah not explicitly state, ‘An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the community of God’ (Deuteronomy 23:4)!” R. Yehoshua replied to him, “Do Ammon and Moab still reside in their original places!? Didn’t Sennacherib king of Assyria long ago go up and mix up all the nations?”… They [decided to] immediately permit him to enter the community… And the student [who posed the original question regarding Ma’ariv] was R. Shimon b. Yoḥai.

And with that enigmatic statement, our story is concluded. Of the countless halakhic debates that occurred on that great day in the beit midrash of Yavne, only one is recounted here. For it is this debate, regarding the permissibility of a questionable convert to enter the Jewish people as a full and equal member, that fully brought forth the magnitude of the revolution that took place on “that day.” R. Elazar b. Azaryah chose to open the doors. But how open are they? We all know from own communities, waving the flag of openness and acceptance is easier said than done. You can imagine the scene, scores of Torah scholars streaming into the beit midrash—they looked and dressed virtually identically. Yet, among them stood someone who didn’t quite appear to belong. Dressed oddly, his skin tone was different, he spoke in a foreign accent and yet he had a beautiful Jewish name: Yehudah the Ammonite Convert. Here the revolution was tested. Those around him wondered “Are we really prepared to let outsiders into the beit midrash, especially when their Jewishness itself is being questioned?” Rabban Gamliel, who with great magnanimity did not absent himself from the beit midrash even after he was removed from his post, wished to deny him entry.
“It is an explicit verse in the Torah!” he exclaimed.

The verse cited in Deuteronomy places a permanent ban on any Moabites or Ammonites from entering the community of God, which halakhically translates into a prohibition for any Jew to marry a Moabite or Ammonite, even if they converted to Judaism.²

R. Yehoshua, however, counters the ban with historical facts which would render it obsolete. Recalling the late eighth-century BCE Assyrian conquering of the Middle East, and the subsequent deportation of most of the native population in that area, R. Yehoshua argued that the current residents of Ammon were certainly not descendants of those original Ammonites, back in the middle of the second-millennia BCE, who had denied food to the hungry Israelites. Therefore, he reasoned, the Ammonite convert who stood before the group should be allowed to marry a Jewish woman. Rabban Gamliel, perhaps humbled by the day’s events, quickly agreed and Yehudah was welcomed into the “community of God.” The doors had indeed been thrown wide open.

This brings us to the final words of the story, which abruptly remind us of how everything began. The student who had a query regarding Ma’ariv’s halakhic status was now identified. He was none other than R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai. Rabbi Akiva’s greatest student was a giant of his generation, a source of mystical inspiration due to the years he spent in spiritual meditation in a cave in the Galilee.³ He was the one who knocked down the first domino. Why was his identity revealed only then? How were the pieces connected? Did the Ma’ariv debate have anything to do with the subsequent events?

By revealing, in dramatic fashion, the identity of the student at the end of the story, the Talmud is urging the reader to connect the dots. There must be a connection, especially given who this student is: R. Shimon b. Yoḥai. He must have known how incendiary his question would be and that the Ma’ariv debate cut to a deeper, more fundamental question raging among the rabbis of the first century concerning the “strategic plan” of the Jewish people in a post-Temple world. The debate was between two main factions, each led by a giant of their generation, Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua.

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² What was the reason for this? In typical Jewish fashion, food is involved. When the Israelites, at the end of their forty-year sojourn in the desert, needed to pass through Amon and Moab, they were not greeted with bread and water, which provoked the anger of God. See Deuteronomy 23. This ban was partially removed, according to the rabbis, in the case of Ruth the Moabite, as the ban was placed only on male Moabites and Ammonites and not their female counterparts (see, e.g., Yevamot 76b).

³ See Shabbat 33b-34a.
There was no question that in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE, the Jewish people were in profound crisis. Jerusalem and the Temple, the two linchpins of Jewish life for at least the previous millennium, were now gone. The Roman presence in the Land of Israel was only becoming more entrenched. There was little hope of the Temple being rebuilt anytime soon. A sinking feeling set in that the phenomenon of a brief seventy-year exile, which followed the destruction of the First Temple would not be repeated this time. What should be done then? Two disparate strategies were put forth-two tendencies that often surface in times of crisis. Which brings us to Ma’ariv.

From the very first line of Berakhot, night and its halakhot are discussed at great length. The particular discussion of Ma’ariv, which appears in the fourth chapter of Berakhot, brings us to a kind of halakhic climax in this topic. The reciting of the nighttime Shema was already considered at great length, now prayer at night, Ma’ariv, is elucidated. However, there’s another layer here which must be understood in order to unlock the depths of this story. R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi did not randomly choose to begin the Mishnah with the halakhot of night. If one digs below the surface of the first chapters of Berakhot, it becomes clear that night in the tractate refers not only to the actual night, but also to the figurative “night” in which the Jewish people found themselves in the first and second centuries, namely, exile. The connection between Berakhot’s night and exile can be seen in the first line. Hassidic masters read the opening question, “From what point during the night can one recite Shema,” as R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi crying to the heavens, a cry echoed by second-century Jews throughout the world: “How do we continue to believe in the One God in the midst of this exile, this never-ending darkness?”

On the subsequent pages, the Talmud describes night as the time during which God mourns over the destruction of His Temple and the exile of His People. The ruins of Jerusalem, as well, literally come to life on a nightly basis, wailing over her empty chambers and begging for the return of her residents. When the rabbis discuss the halakhic obligations associated with nighttime, just below the surface lurks a broader, more painful and urgent conversation: how should a Jew navigate long exile while not giving up the hope of an eventual return? This is the background to R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai’s question. This is no innocent halakhic query but a dilemma that touches the very core of the Yavne era. How does a Jew pray at night? How does a Jew lift her heart to God while darkness surrounds him? How does he maintain his hope? How does she persevere? How does he survive? How does a Jew pray at night? And here we come to the disagreement. Rabban Gamliel says, “Ma’ariv is an obligatory prayer.” With what orientation does one approach the exile? With one of “obligation”—clearly

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4 Mishnah Berakhot 1:1: מואסימין קורין את שם ברברית.
5 תפלת הכרב אין לך קבע. 4:1.
delineated lines of practice and hierarchy, with the goal to maintain what we have until the exiles ends. Rabban Gamliel’s strategy is this: circle the wagons, fiercely maintain the current standards and practices, build a small group of the best and brightest who will tread water until we are able to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Every attempt should be made to maintain the contours of Jewish life as they were before the destruction. Just as a clear hierarchy was a main feature of Temple life, so too here in Yavne, a semblance of hierarchy should be kept. Simply put, maintain stable Jewish life until the coming of the Messiah.

R. Yehoshua says, “Maariv is reshut.” How do we move forward? Without knowing exactly how. With an orientation of reshut—with openness. R. Yehoshua, like Karl Marx and other philosophers, understood that crises can produce openings for radical change. Whereas Rabban Gamliel was trying to avoid change at all costs, R. Yehoshua was running in the opposite direction. Since the great biblical prophets and the early rabbis, Jewish leaders have been pushing for change, but the “openings” for that transformation simply weren’t there. The inertia of the existing institutions was too strong. Then came the destruction, followed by the upstart Jewish community in Yavne, established by Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s plea to Vespasian, “Give me Yavne and its sages.” This abandonment of Jerusalem and embrace of Yavne marked the beginning of a new era, in which the book replaced sacrifice. R. Yehoshua wanted to continue the revolution started by Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai and take it to its logical conclusion. He wanted to break the doors down, to let hundreds of new voices join the conversation, and to pave the murky path forward with new ideas.

It now becomes clear why Rabban Gamliel could under no circumstances allow R. Yehoshua to preach his “Ma’ariv reshut” gospel. He understood the revolutionary ethos implicit in this halakhic opinion. Yet ironically, it was Rabban Gamliel’s very attempt to quiet R. Yehoshua that convinced the students of the correctness of R. Yehoshua’s path. They understood that the beit midrash could never become the upstart institution it needed to be without a free and open exchange of ideas. Rabban Gamliel had overplayed his card. They quickly installed a young new leader, R. Elazar b. Azaryah, who took the next obvious step of the “Ma’ariv reshut” approach—he flung the doors of the beit midrash wide open. And in walked Yehudah the Ammonite Convert, whose very presence manifested the transformation that had taken place on that great day—Ammon was no longer Ammon, and Israel no longer Israel. A new day had dawned.

But we’re not done yet. The last Mishnah in the first chapter of Berakhot is linked to “that day” and it fills a crucial hole in our discussion.

משנה ברכות א:ה

6 Gittin 56b.
Mishnah Berakhot 1:5
One must recall the Exodus from Egypt at night. R. Elazar b. Azaryah said: I am as if I am seventy years old and I did not merit that the Exodus from Egypt should be recalled at night, until Ben Zoma expounded, “That you may remember the day you went out of the Land of Egypt all the days of your life” (Deuteronomy 16:3). “The days of your life,” refers to daytime; “All the days of your life,” [comes to include] the nights.” The sages, however, say, “The days of your life,” refers to daytime; “All the days of your life,” [comes to include] the Messianic Age.

This Mishnah is, of course, made famous by the Haggadah, but its radical nature is often overlooked. What was R. Elazar b. Azaryah saying? Why did he reference his age? And where had Ben Zoma been until this point? The answer, provided by Rashi, should be obvious at this point:

ר’ אלעזר בן עזרא, הוא נראה זקן, לא זקן משא, שבא ביום ש(skbא רבי גמליאל מנשיאותו ומותו, רבי אלעזר בן עזריה נשבא. ואותו יום דרש בן זומא מקרא זה.

Rashi on Talmud Bavli Berakhot 12b
He looked old even though he wasn’t actually old because “old age quickly came upon him” on the day in which Rabban Gamliel was deposed and he was placed in his stead... and on that day Ben Zoma expounded this verse.

In other words, Ben Zoma was one of those students who had been denied entry to the beit midrash until the day when R. Elazar b. Azaryah suddenly turned old and opened the doors of the beit midrash. This allowed Ben Zoma to enter and for his radical idea of mentioning the Exodus at night to be expounded publicly. Only then does R. Elazar b. Azaryah “merit” to hear the halakha that is so deeply connected to the events of the day, as it expresses the next step of R. Yehoshua’s revolution.

Not only is the present situation better than Rabban Gamliel would have us believe and not only can we permit ourselves to imagine a new kind of Judaism, but we can even recall the Exodus at night. In other words, we will do more than just survive the night, we will transform the night into day, exile into redemption! For R. Yehoshua’s central insight was that the current darkness, or crisis, provides us opportunities to do things we could only dream of while the Temple was still standing. There is not only hope at night, there is redemption at night. For the seeds of a new, more dynamic Judaism can finally be planted.
And there’s more. If we dig just a little deeper into R. Yehoshua’s thinking, we encounter an idea that changes everything. Rabban Gamliel had a clear vision of how to survive the exile because he also knew where we are heading. We are going back to the Second Temple, or a Third Temple that looks identical to the Second. This explains how he can advocate for treading water—we have already been to where we are headed. We just have to keep our heads above water until we get there. R. Yehoshua had a different idea altogether. We don’t know where we’re going, and we don’t know what the Third Temple will look like. But the more voices we bring into the conversation and the greater variety of personalities we have involved in building the path forward, the more glorious and radically new the “Third Temple” will be.

In other words, once you proclaim the redemption that happens at night, you are also saying that where we are now, in the “post-Temple” era, could be better than where we were when the Temple was standing. Which also means that we have no interest in retreating into the past. Our sights are set on uncharted spiritual territory.

Incredibly, this is exactly what Ben Zoma says in the Talmudic text which follows the Mishna. The sages in the Mishnah believe that the Exodus should be recalled during the day and during the Messianic Age, and, in contrast to Ben Zoma, not at night:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות יב
תניא, אמר להם בן זומא לחכמים: וכי מזכירים יציאת מצרים לימים המשיח? והלא כבר נאמר: "הנה ימים באים נאם ה' ולא יאמרו עוד חי ה' אשר העלה את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים, כי אם חי ה' אשר העלה ואשר הביא את זרע בית ישראל מארץ צפונה ומכל הארצות אשר הדחיתם שם" (ירמיה כג:ז!).

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 12b

It has been taught: Ben Zoma said to the sages: Will the Exodus from Egypt be mentioned in the Messianic Age? Was it not long ago said: “Behold days are coming, says God, that they shall no more say: as the Lord lives that brought up the Children of Israel out of the Land of Egypt; but, as the Lord lives that brought up and that led the seed of the House of Israel out of the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them” (Jeremiah 23:7).

Once we say that redemption happens amid exile, you also declare that the future redemption will be radically different than anything we have experienced until now. The sages, who say that we will continue to speak of the Exodus from Egypt after the coming of the messiah, maintain that the Messianic Age will not be different than the world in which we currently live. The messianic events will not overwhelm, overshadow, or outstrip the Exodus story. The Messianic Age exists on a continuum with our current reality. R. Yehoshua and Ben
Zoma are saying that we are headed to not only greener pastures, but to pastures which are vastly different than what we know now. That is why “new voices” are a must in the beginning of this path. They are breaking out of their current mode. They need rabbis who are not stuck in the old paradigm. They need Yehudah Ammonite Converts. There’s a direct line connecting “Ma’ariv reshut” to Ben Zoma’s dream of limitless possibility.

A rabbinic teaching on the tabernacle, as explained by R. Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, expresses this very idea. When God commanded Moses to build the mishkan as a home for the Divine Presence, Moses was dumbfounded as to how a finite physical building could contain the infinite presence of God:

**Shemot Rabbah 32**

When God commanded Moses on the building of the mishkan, Moses said to God, “Master of the World, how can Israel build such a thing?” God responded, “Even one Israelite alone could build it, as it says, “From every person who gives of his heart” (Exodus 25:2).

R. Tzadok explains that God responded to Moses that he is correct, it is impossible for human beings to build a finite structure in which the Infinite Presence of God will dwell. But if the hearts of Israel truly desire it, then it will happen.7

It’s in our hands. The further we expand our imagination, the more remarkable the final redemption will be, (however unlikely the imagined future may seem). There are still Rabban Gamliels among us. They are hoping and praying for a return to what once was. We must never forget that day when the first cornerstones of R. Yehoshua’s revolution were laid, a revolution perhaps drawn from the last words of our communal reading of Lamentations: “Renew our days as of old” (5:21). This is a message of light in a dark book. We pine for the glory days of David and Shlomo, but what we want is something more than that. We want something new.

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7 Pri Tzadik, Parshat Terumah.