



The Impossibility of Knowing

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I was sitting in a circle in a cabin in the woods of the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center. It was still dark but I sat with fifteen others as we began to sing, warming up for morning prayers. Was it night? Perhaps. It was dark, it was quiet, and at that hour, most people still clung to the warmth of their beds. Or was it morning? We were up, our day had started and soon the light would break. I had recently learned there was a *mishnah* (Berakhot 1:2) that asks the question, “From when can one recite the morning Shema?” and in doing so, the Mishnah attempts to articulate the precise moment when night becomes morning. With this *mishnah* on my mind, I looked outside waiting to see the moment when shadows separate from light. When blue is distinct from white. When one can recognize a friend.¹ I wanted to witness the precise moment that night gave way to morning. But, of course, even as I waited with watchful eyes, that moment was elusive—impossible to pin down.

Whenever I explain the difference between Mishnah and Gemara, I always think about this Mishnah in Berakhot and the subsequent Gemara that follows. What is the Gemara? The Gemara is the later rabbis’ attempt to debate, dissect, and analyze the teachings of the Mishnah. The project of the Gemara is a project of precision. No detail is too small, no definition not worth defining. From the concrete—what qualifies as eating and on what food is one obligated to bless (48b)?—to the abstract—what does it mean to stand to pray from a place of *koved rosh* (Mishnah 5:1)? The rabbis of the Gemara attempt to make clear all that which is unclear in the Mishnah, to know all that which is unknown, even—and perhaps especially—when that involves the unknowable.

¹ See Talmud Bavli Berakhot 9b.



And, yet despite this effort to define and quantify every term, time, and entity, Massekhet Berakhot offers us multiple aggadic stories in which the rabbis find themselves at a loss when it comes to all that they don't know. Despite their best efforts to do what's right, despite a lifetime centered around this kind of attempt to uncover a precise understanding of God's will, they discover that they have, in fact, erred in their understanding. The question is: What do they do when they realize that they are wrong? While we encounter several of these narratives in the course of this *massekhet*, including the story of Rabbi Meir and the sinners (10a) and Rabban Gamliel and the closed doors of the *beit midrash* (28a), I want to focus on two stories in particular.

On 6b, we read:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ו:

אמר רבי זירא: מריש כי הוה חזינא להו לרבנן דקא דקא רהטי לפרקא בשבתא אמינא קא מחליין רבנן שבתא
כיון דשמענא להא דרבי תנחום א"ר יהושע בן לוי לעולם ירוץ אדם לדבר הלכה ואפילו בשבת שנא'
(הושע יא, י) "אחרי ה' ילכו כאריה ישאג" וגו' אנא נמי רהיטנא:

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 6b

Rabbi Zeira said: Initially, when I saw the sages running to the lecture on Shabbat, I said: These Sages are desecrating Shabbat. When I heard that which Rabbi Tanhūm said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One should always run for a matter of *halakhah*, even on Shabbat, as it is stated: "They shall walk after the Lord, who will roar like a lion" (Hosea 11:10)—I too run.

What's going on in this story? Rabbi Zeira had learned—and correctly so—that one is forbidden from running, or more specifically taking long strides on Shabbat.² And so, when he sees his friends and colleagues and the important rabbis around him running to the lecture on Shabbat, he judges them and harshly at that. He says to himself, "These rabbis are desecrating the Shabbat." He would continue walking to the lecture, affirmed in the righteousness of his own behavior and sure of the wickedness of those around him. But then something happened. Rabbi Zeira learned a new teaching from Rabbi Tanhūm in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. He learned that even on Shabbat, one should run after a word of *halakhah*. How do we know this? From the verse in Hosea: "They shall walk after the Lord, who will roar like a lion." How should we walk after the Lord? As if we are being chased by a lion.

² See Talmud Bavli Shabbat 113b: The idea here is that we learn that one's walking on Shabbat should not be like one's walking during the weekday. How is it different? On Shabbat, we are forbidden to take long strides out of respect for Shabbat. Interestingly, we learn on Berakhot 43, that in one shouldn't take long strides even on a weekday as it takes away 1/500th of a person's eyesight.



And so, Rabbi Zeira who was so quick to judge the actions of those around him, and so affirmed in the righteousness of his own measured steps, realizes he is wrong. He was not only wrong to judge others, but he himself had not been acting according to *halakhah*. And, what does he do? He admits fault and changes his action. He says, “And now, I too will run.” After learning this piece of new information and discovering that all along he had been incorrect, he not only realizes the error of his ways, he integrates the new information and corrects his actions moving forward. As quick as he was to judge, he is equally quick to admit fault and to change. Rabbi Zeira teaches us the grace in admitting we were wrong and the humility in moving forward.

Rabbi Zeira is not the only one in Massekhet Berakhot to realize he made a mistake. On 5b, Rav Huna discovers the steep price of his misdeeds. The story opens with Rav Huna suffering a huge financial loss: four hundred barrels of his wine have turned from wine to vinegar. Several of his colleagues visit him after hearing the news and suggest, “The Master should examine his deeds.” Meaning to say: “Perhaps you have done something wrong and this is the Divine Punishment for your actions?”

Rav Huna is taken aback. “Me? I have done something wrong? You suspect me? If so, tell me exactly what I have done wrong,” he says. “What have I done to deserve this?” His colleagues answer: “We hear that you are not giving your farm workers the portion of grapevines that you owe them for their labor.”

Rav Huna is outraged. “Those workers? Those thieves who steal from me and leave nothing left? After they take from me while they harvest, I should still pay them their vines on top of what they’ve already steal!?” Perhaps, on some level, Rav Huna knows that he is doing something wrong by failing to give them their share of the grapevines but he justifies the behavior to himself. They have stolen from him and so surely this doesn’t qualify as him stealing from them. He is certain. He is in the right and they are in the wrong.

His colleagues respond: “This is like the old folk saying, ‘One who steals from a thief has a taste of theft.’” They’re saying to him: “Yes, perhaps they have done you wrong. But still, you cannot justify your own bad behavior. In stealing from them, you yourself act as a thief.” Rav Huna then makes a surprising aboutface. Rav Huna, who was so sure of his rightness just a moment before, accepts his colleagues’ rebuke. He commits to giving his farmers their rightful share of the grapevines, despite their continued thievery.

There’s two aspects to this story that I want to highlight. First, how quickly Rav Huna turns on a dime. Initially, he is so defensive, so outraged at the suggestion that he is somehow



responsible for this loss. He is convinced of the rightness of his actions and quick to defend them. And, yet with one word of rebuke from his colleagues, he realizes his error and changes his behavior. Second, what separates this narrative from the story with Rabbi Zeira in which he incorrectly judges the other rabbis, is that at the end of the day, Rav Huna's workers are, in fact, stealing from him. He has good reason to feel justified in not paying them on top of what they've already stolen. And yet, despite the fact that he could easily dig his heels in, that he had legitimate reason to believe in his own rightness, he admits fault and he's willing to rise above it.

Both Rabbi Zeira and Rav Huna thought they had it all figured out—and yet, when they realize that they are, in fact, the ones at fault, they are quick to integrate this new understanding and change their actions going forward. While we may try to define and quantify the world around us in a precise attempt to understand God's will, sometimes we get it wrong. Rabbi Zeira and Rav Huna model for us what it looks like to admit when we're wrong, even and perhaps especially when we have good reason to believe that we are right.

But we learn this not just from Rabbi Zeira and Rav Huna. We learn this from none other than God. In the Book of Deuteronomy, God commands Moses:

דברים כ:טז-יז

לֹקְמַעְרֵי הָעַמִּים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לֹא תַחֲסֶיהָ כָּל־נַפְשָׁמָהּ: כִּי־הַחֲרָם תַּחֲרִימֶם הַחַיִּי וְהָאָמִרִי הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרָזִי הַחִוִּי וְהַיְּבוּסִי כָאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Deuteronomy 20:16-17

In the towns of the latter peoples, however, which the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must destroy them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you.

In the Torah, God is clear. “The lands that I’ve given you as your inheritance, hold nothing back. Let no one live. Anyone or anything that gets in the way must be eliminated.” However, Midrash Tanhuma (Parashat Tzav) suggests that Moses was less than comfortable with this command. Moses says back to God, “Am I to go and smite he who has sinned and he who has not sinned? Instead, let me come against them in peace.” Moses is not okay with killing anyone in his path, including those who are innocent. Rather he says, “First let me approach these cities in peace.” And then, and only then, if they don’t find some peaceful resolution to move forward will he turn to violence.



According to the *midrash*, God reconsiders. “The Holy One says, ‘I Myself told you, “No, you shall utterly destroy them,” but you did not do this. By your life, just as you have said, so will I do.’ Thus it is stated, ‘When you draw near unto a city to fight against it, you shall offer terms of peace unto it.’ Therefore, it is so stated, ‘The ways [of wisdom] are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace’ (Proverbs 3:17).”

God says to Moses, “I told you to destroy them but you didn’t do it. Instead, you pointed out the immorality of destroying those who have sinned with those who are innocent. And you know what?” God says, “You were right. From here on, when you’re approaching a city, first approach a city in peace.” And this is what’s meant by the verse in Proverbs, “All of her paths are peace.”

God was willing to be wrong. God was willing to be incorrect. God, the All-Knowing, the Source of All Knowledge, concedes to Moses and changes God’s mind. If God can do it, if Rav Huna and Rabbi Zeira can do it, perhaps we can do it as well. Perhaps, we can admit that sometimes we are wrong. That there are some things that we just don’t understand.

We learn this teaching explicitly on Berakhot 7a. There, Rabbi Yoḥanan teaches us in the name of Rabbi Yosei that Moses asked the Holy One for three things: (i) that the Divine Presence rest on Israel, (ii) that the Divine Presence not rest on the other nations, and (iii) that God reveal to Moses God’s ways. In the first version of this teaching, we’re told that God granted Moses all three requests, including that God revealed to Moses the mystery behind the way God governs the world. Rabbi Meir, however, disagrees. Rabbi Meir says that God granted all of Moses’ requests but one: God did not reveal to Moses God’s ways. How do we know that? It’s as the verse teaches, “And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Exodus 33:19). We would like to think there’s a clear rhyme and reason as to why good befalls some people while others struggle—but there’s not. Or, if there is, God chooses not reveal that wisdom to us. We, like Moses, are left in the dark. Our wish to know God and God’s ways is not granted. Despite our good intentions to understand God’s will through the precise interpretation of halakhic detail, there are some things that we cannot know.

In Likkutei Halakhot (Laws of Hoda’ah 6:24),³ Rabbi Natan teaches that the height of knowing is the realization and acceptance of all that we do not know.⁴ He connects this to the verse from Genesis (28:16): “Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it.’” Traditionally, we understand this verse to mean that God was

³ Likkutei Halakhot is a work in which Rabbi Natan Sternhartz of Nemirov gives over Rebbe Naḥman’s teachings as they correspond to the Shulḥan Arukh.

⁴ We also find this teaching in Rebbe Naḥman’s Likkutei Moharan in several places, e.g. II:83.



there all along and Jacob didn't realize it. That seems to be the plain meaning of the verse. Rabbi Natan teaches, however, it is only when Jacob says, "I do not know," when he realizes the limits of his knowledge and embraces all that he does not know, that he discovers God's presence. It's a confounding paradox. How do we come to know God? We have to accept the impossibility of knowing. The possibility of knowledge comes only when we embrace our inability to know.

So, what do we do? In a rabbinic project that's all about a precise desire to define each and every term, to know and quantify, in an effort to understand the world around us, how do we just embrace not-knowing? What becomes of our project? Of our attempt to know God?

Our stories in Massekhet Berakhot offer us a way forward. We don't give up on our project. We keep working to define and dissect, to understand and to reveal, but we do so with the full knowledge of our fallibility. Because the one thing that we do know is that we just might be wrong about the things about which we were certain. If God can be wrong, if our great rabbis can be wrong, then we can be wrong too. But, we don't give up. Knowing and unknowing, doubt and certainty, right and wrong, we know that any moment our understanding of these terms can be flipped on their head and when that moment comes, we'll be ready to say, "I was wrong and I am ready to move forward."

