# Mafsikim

Chaim Katz Montreal

We were taught Arvé Pesahim in high school but we didn’t get too far. We spent a very long while on the second page of the chapter. The problem was here:

*Rabban Shimon b Gamliel, R. Yehuda and R. Yosei were reclining in Acre. The Sabbath arrived. Rabban Shimon b Gamliel said to R Yosei: With your permission, let us interrupt [our meal] and respect the words of our colleague Yehuda? R. Yosei responded: all your life you admire my words more than Yehuda’s, and now you admire Yehuda's words more than mine, “Will he rape the queen when I am at home”* (Esther 7:8). *Let’s not interrupt because the students might see and establish the halakha for generations. They didn’t move from there until they established the halakha like Rabbi Yosei* – Pesahim 100a [1]

Our high school teacher had a hard time trying to explain how the quote from the Megillah was relevant. How could one Rabbi suggest that the other Rabbi was Haman? Who is Esther?

We’re talking about when to say Kiddush if you start a meal Friday afternoon and continue eating into the night. R. Yehuda’s opinion is to say Kiddush in the middle of the meal (after moving the table away), when the night falls and Shabbat begins. R. Yosei opines that you finish the meal first and say Kiddush afterwards when the meal is over. [2]

The Gemarah is usually explained this way: Rabban Shimon b Gamliel followed the lenient view of R. Yosei. He made Kiddush after the entire meal had ended. However, this time, because R. Yehuda was present [3], R Shimon b Gamliel asked R. Yosei to follow the stricter opinion of R. Yehuda, interrupt the meal, and make Kiddush at the start of Shabbat. R. Yosei emphatically refused. He feared (or according to some versions Rabban Shimon b Gamliel feared) that the students would mistakenly assume that R. Yehuda’s view was the Halakha and establish it for generations. [4]

This explanation is difficult. Prior to this Shabbat, the students always saw Rabban Shimon b Gamliel observe the halakhic position of R. Yosei. Following this Shabbat, they will again see him follow the practice of R. Yosei. This week and this week alone, he interrupts the meal as per R. Yehuda. Why should the students think that the Halakha follows R. Yehuda?

Another difficulty: Today, we appreciate the idea of following a more stringent practice in order to satisfy many divergent opinions, but this approach didn’t exist in Talmudic times. (I heard that this innovation is attributed to R. Meir of Rothenburg of the 13th century, who was influenced by the Hasidei Ashkenaz movement.) If R. Shimon b Gamliel agrees with R. Yosei, why would he think to be stringent according to the view of R. Yehuda?

Tangentially, why were the sages and their students eating a meal on Friday afternoon as Shabbat was starting. They should have been in Synagogue saying the evening prayers together with everyone else. Dr. Daniel Goldschmidt explains: In those days, the evening prayer was voluntary. The community didn’t pray in the evenings and didn’t attend shul in the evenings. [5]

It’s interesting that the original dispute whether the evening prayer is required or not, was between Rabban Gamliel (the head of the Sanhedrin) and R. Yehoshua. What happened next isn’t clear. Did they resolve the halakha in favor of Rabban Gamliel or did the sages interrupt the proceedings, dismiss him from his post and rule according to R. Yehoshua. Maybe no decision was taken. However, barely a generation later, Rabban Gamliel’s son, Rabban Shimon b Gamliel doesn’t follow his father’s opinion. He also doesn’t accept the stringency of saying the evening prayer. [6]

The Gemara mentions that the meal and discussion took place in Akko [7]. R. Yehuda lived in Usha. The Sanhedrin was also in Usha then and Rabban Shimon b Gamliel the head of the Sanhedrin lived there as well. R. Yosei lived in Zippori (Sepphoris, about 20 Km from Usha). Rabbi Yehuda was מוריינא דבי נשיאה or מוריינא דנשיא—the halachic authority in the house of the Nasi. According to Rashi: “all their practices followed R. Yehuda’s decisions”. When he was home (in Usha), R. Shimon b. Gamliel had to follow the decisions of R. Yehudah and interrupted his Friday afternoon meal to make Kiddush when Shabbat started. [8]

In Akko, R. Shimon b Gamliel thought to do as he usually did at home. Apparently, he was the host (his name is mentioned first) and he was in charge. If R. Yehuda was present, his presence added to the sense of Usha that accompanied the meal.

R Yosei refused to follow R. Yehuda’s view. He explained his position this way: The Nasi doesn't usually have the opportunity to follow my words but now that we are in Acco, there's no longer reason to follow the decision of R. Yehuda. R Yosei quotes from the book of Esther to support this idea.

R. Amos Hakham , in his commentary to the Book of Esther writes: [9]

We usually think that the drunken (foolish) king attributed intent to Haman that Haman didn’t have . . . But even if the king understood and knew that Haman was begging for his life from Queen Esther, he still had the right to punish Haman. In falling on the Queen’s couch, Haman acted against the self-respect and modesty of the Queen. That act of Haman’s was punishable.

R. Hakham continues (in a footnote):

Odysseus faced a similar situation (in Book IV). He debated whether to clasp the knees of a princess as a suppliant does, or whether to keep his distance from her and speak with courteous words . . . Odysseus finally decided to make his request from afar.

We can build on R. Hakham’s explanation a little bit (and maybe the following interpretation is already included in his words.) Haman's fatal mistake was his petitioning the queen, instead of begging for his life from the king. Ahasuerus was insulted. “When I’m not here, I understand, you might pleadyou’re your life from the queen; but I am here and I am the authority. You should address your pleading to me.” [10]

We can now put everyone in place. R Yosei is Ahasuerus. R. Yehuda is Esther and R. Shimon b Gamliel is acting like Haman in the sense that he’s recognizing R. Yehuda’s authority where R. Yosei’s view is authoritative. [11]

Rabban Shimon b Gamliel accepted this argument and publicized a ruling that agreed with R. Yosei: “They did not move from there until they established the halakha in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yosei”. Nevertheless, the ruling barely lasted two generations. We read: “Rav Yehuda said in Shmuel’s name: The halakha is not in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, nor is it in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yosei, instead, (when Shabbat starts), spread a cloth over the table and recite Kiddush.” Like R. Yehuda we make Kiddush as soon as the Shabbat starts. [12]

We read (Shabbat 25b): “This was the custom of Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai. On Shabbat eve, they would bring him a tub full of hot water and he would wash his face, hands, and feet. He would sit and drape a special linen cloak around himself, resembling a prophet of the Lord of hosts.” [13]

I don’t know how R. Yehuda prepared himself on that Shabbat eve in Acco. Did he follow his usual custom or did he defer to the others and minimize his preparations in order to join the meal? There does however seem to be something in common between his preparations for Shabbat and his saying Kiddush immediately when Shabbat begins.

R. Soloveitchik spoke about R. Yehuda’s preparations. They included three things: washing, wearing a tallit, and waiting and looking forward to the Shabbat. The same three things are also involved in preparations for the daily prayer. One washes before prayer. One wears a special garment–tallit during prayer. One puts himself in a serious frame of mind (כובד ראש), and then pauses or waits a bit before beginning the prayers. R. Soloveitchik explains that both Shabbat and prayer share a common motif of standing before the divine presence (shekhinah). Therefore, one’s mode of preparation is similar. [14]

I think, we can now explain in a simple way, why we follow R. Yehuda’s time for Kiddush, why we don’t usually eat a meal that starts before Shabbat and stretches into Shabbat and why we have evening prayers Friday night. All of these revolve around the idea of preparing for Shabbat and formalizing the arrival of Shabbat. Over time this is something that became important enough to be legislated as the Halakha for generations.