# 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 with me 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 compared to Esther?

There is a difference of opinion 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. [2]

The Gemarah is usually explained this way: Rabban Shimon b Gamliel always 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 go to shul. : [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. It looks like they were going to resolve the halakha in favor of Rabban Gamliel, but then the sages interrupted the proceedings and dismissed him from his post. Either way, now, barely a generation later, Rabban Gamliel’s son, Rabban Shimon b Gamliel doesn’t follow his father’s opinion and doesn’t take the stringency of saying the evening prayer upon himself. [6]

The key to deciphering our is the information that the meal and discussion took place in Akko [7].

R. Yehuda lived in Usha. At that time, the Sanhedrin was also in Usha and Rabban Shimon b Gamliel its head 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”. Clearly, when he was home (in Usha), R. Shimon b. Gamliel followed the decisions of R. Yehudah. He 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. Maybe if R. Yehuda was present, that added to his feeling of being at home.

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:

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.

I think we can build on R. Hakham’s explanation a little bit (and maybe what I’ll say 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 plead for you life from the queen; but I am here and I am the authority. You should be pleading from me.” [10]

R Yosi's voices a parallel argument. "In Usha I'm not present, it’s correct that you follow R Yehuda’s view as he is the authority there. Everywhere else (since you, Rabban Shimon b Gamliel, always cherish my words), you should follow my view. We can now put everyone in place. R Yosi 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. Yosi’s view is authorative. [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 before it adopted a position much closer to R. Yehuda. We read next: “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 can explain (in non-Halakhic terms) why we follow an opinion like R. Yehuda’s. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in the Aggadic portion of one of the yahrzeit shiurim discusses the Gemara (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 draped in a special linen cloak resembling a messenger (or prophet?) of the Lord of hosts.” [13]

R. Soloveitchik notes, that R. Yehuda’s washing, wearing a tallit, and waiting (he would sit) for the Shabbat is parallel to the standard preparations for prayer. One washes before prayer. According to RMBM one must wash face, hands, and feet. 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. The content of prayer is to stand before the Shekhinah. The content of Shabbat eve is to greet the Shekhinah. Therefore, we prepare for Shabbat the same way we prepare for prayer. [14]

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 who were there, minimize his preparations in order to join the meal? However, it appears that eventually there was a shift. We accept R. Yehuda’s eve of Shabbat preparations and we interrupt the Friday evening meal to say Kiddush, (if we would be eating at that time.) Even the additional Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy is universally accepted.