REVERENCE FOR DOUBT: AN EPISTOLARY CONFRONTATION

Tractate Chullin 95b describes a tense epistolary exchange between the Babylonian Amora, Shmuel, and Rebbe Yochanan, the leading Palestinian scholar who headed the academy in Caesarea:

רב בדיק במברא ושמואל בדיק בספרא רבי יוחנן בדיק בינוקא

כולהו שני דרב הוה כתב ליה רבי יוחנן לקדם רבינו שבבבל כי נח נפשיה הוה כתב לשמואל לקדם חבירינו שבבבל כתב שדר אמר לא ידע לי מידי דרביה אנא כתב שדר ליה עיבורא דשיתין שני אמר השתא חושבנא בעלמא ידע ליה תליסר גמלי ספקי טריפתא אמר אית לי רב בבבל איזיל איחזייה א"ל לינוקא פסוק לי פסוקיך אמר ליה (שמואל א כח, ג) ושמואל מת אמר ש"מ נח נפשיה דשמואל ולא היא לא שכיב שמואל אלא כי היכי דלא ליטרח רבי יוחנן

The following is my free translation of this exchange.

Rav, the head of the Babylonian academy of Sura, would regard a ferry-boat as an omen. Therefore, if he was uncertain as to whether or not he should engage in a voyage, he would view the accessibility of a ferry-boat as an omen from Heaven that he should take the trip. Shmuel, Rav's colleague, would regard a passage chosen at random from a Biblical book as an omen. R. Yochanan would regard a Biblical verse quoted by a child as an omen.

The following incident demonstrates the extent to which R. Yochanan depended upon a verse quoted by a child in order to decide whether to embark on a long journey.

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Whenever R. Yochanan would correspond with Rav, he would commence his letter with the following salutation: "Greetings to Our Master in Babylon!"

After Rav's death, R. Yochanan began corresponding with Shmuel. When writing to Shmuel, however, he would address him thus: "Greetings to Our Colleague in Babylon!"

Shmuel, apparently offended by this distinction, said to himself, "Is there no subject regarding which I am R. Yochanan's master?!"

Samuel therefore decided to demonstrate to R. Yochanan his superiority regarding his understanding of the Jewish calendar by sending to R. Yochanan the mathematical and astronomical analyses which would determine the Jewish calendar for the next sixty years.

R. Yochanan was not impressed. In response to Shmuel's sixty year calendar, he remarked: "He merely knows calculations."

Undaunted, Shmuel proceeded to send to R. Yochanan thirteen camel-loads of questions concerning doubtful cases of trefah (i.e., animals which, when examined after slaughtering, manifest possible indications of disease which may render them non-kosher).

In response to this second delivery, R. Yochanan declared, "It is now clear to me that I have a Master in Babylon; I must go and see him."

He said to a child, "Recite to me the last Biblical verse you have learnt." The child quoted the following verse from I Shmuel: "Now Shmuel died." Said R. Yochanan, "This is an omen, indicating that Shmuel has died; therefore, I no longer have a reason to Leave the Holy Land and travel to Babylon."

Actually, this was not the case; Shmuel had not yet passed away. Heaven caused R. Yochanan to hear precisely that verse in order that R. Yochanan not trouble himself to undertake the long journey to Babylon.

ANALYSIS

1. After Rav passed away, Samuel was acknowledged as the pre-eminent rabbinic leader of Babylonian Jewry. In addition to being an illustrious scholar in the realm of Halacha, Samuel was also a preeminent physician, mathematician and astronomer. The Talmud contains numerous allusions to Samuel's unique mastery in the medical and scientif1c realms: for example, he cured R. Yehudah Hanassi of a serious eye ailment. His mastery of astronomy lead him to assert: "pathways of the stars and planets are as clear to me as are the roads of Neharda'a."

Rabbi Yochanan, the head of the academy in Caesarea, was recognized throughout the Jewish world as the leading Palestinian scholar. Our sugya informs us that in R. Yochanan's epistles to Rav, he had always chosen the prestigious honorific "Rabbeinu" ["Our Master"] as his salutation. In his subsequent epistles to Samuel, however, he chose the less reverential title of "Chavereinu" ["Our Colleague"].

2. In his reaction to this salutation, Samuel does not focus on his own egotistical feelings or on political issues. He was concerned, rather, that R. Yochanan's appraisal of him was objectively incorrect. Samuel articulates his concern in precise language:

לא ידע לי מידי דרביה אנא ?

"Is not [R. Yochanan] aware of any realm in which I am his superior [literally: his rav, master]?"

This formulation reflects Samuel's belief that his own overall scholarly greatness compared to Rav's was not R. Yochanan's issue here. Even if Rav had been Samuel's superior in rabbinic scholarship – and perhaps he was – Samuel was convinced that R. Yochanan would not have deprived him of the "Rabbeinu" honorific for that reason alone.

Samuel is certain that R. Yochanan would have accorded him the "Rabbeinu" honorific as long as he (Samuel) had mastered some "realm" ("מידי") of Torah knowledge – any "specialty" – in which he would prove himself to be R. Yochanan's superior. R. Yochanan's error, according to Samuel, lay in his assumption that Samuel possessed no such specialty, that no scholarly realm exists in which R. Yochanan would appropriately consider him to be his "rav/master".

This approach implies a system of collegial assessment which places greater stress upon the value of specialized knowledge than upon the total amount of knowledge one has amassed. One may be someone's "Rav" in one realm of Torah scholarship and his "talmid" in another. This approach may thus increase a sense of egalitarianism among scholars. A pre-eminent talmid chacham may view a lesser scholar as his "Rebbe" due to the latter's specialized field of expertise.

3. Samuel does not criticize R. Yochanan for his inaccurate assessment of him; he simply attempts to disabuse R. Yochanan of this assessment by sending him a dramatically impressive example of his most specialized scholarship, namely, in the complex field of calendrical computations. Samuel apparently assumed that R. Yochanan would respect him for his ability to press his mastery of astronomy and mathematics into the service of Jewish Law. He also

assumed, correctly, that the subject of calendrical astronomy is one which R. Yochanan had not mastered.

4. R. Yochanan's refusal to be impressed with the calendar – ("He merely knows calculations!") – may reflect his attitude towards secular, scientific knowledge in general: he summarily dismisses it as irrelevant to determining one's stature as a Torah leader. R. Yochanan certainly understood that mastery of these disciplines is necessary for the viability of Torah life. He was well aware of the truism that without an authentic calendar, Judaism would not survive. The Palestinian sage, however, was of the opinion that scientific knowledge, although necessary for the establishment of a Torah way of life, does not in and of itself constitute the reality of Torah knowledge. In the parlance of modern Yeshiva parlance: it does not constitute a חפצא של תורה, a substantive, intrinsic Torah phenomenon. Astronomy and mathematics are thus to be valued, according to R. Yochanan, only as neutral skills – potential maidservants which may be utilized for eternal ends.

This first exchange, therefore, reflects an implicit ideological disagreement between the two sages regarding the intrinsic religious value of scientific study and knowledge.

5. When R. Yochanan dismisses the significance of Samuel's calendar for the purposes of Torah scholarship, Samuel once again

manifests forbearance. He does not attempt to defend his case on ideological grounds; he does not try to disabuse his Palestinian colleague of his stance towards the sciences. Instead, he calmly persists in his efforts to win “Rabbeinu” status from R. Yochanan by sending him, this time, bona fide halachic material. More precisely, he sends to R. Yochanan material derived from Jewish sources exclusively: thirteen camel-loads (Rashi informs us that this quantity is hyperbolic) of halachic cases describing animals slaughtered in such a way that the status of their kashrut is legally in doubt.

6. Rashi suggests, alternatively, that these cases involved doubtful ritual impurity. The significance of this interpretation is that it makes Samuel’s mastery of Torah scholarship even more impressive. The laws of kashrut had always been in full force in Babylon, no less than in the Land of Israel, and it is reasonable to assume, therefore, that numerous doubtful cases involving kashrut would have been presented to the members of the Babylonian academies as a matter of course. The laws of ritual impurity, in contrast, were irrelevant to much halachic practice in Babylon. Samuel’s extensive knowledge of doubtful impurity cases would therefore reflect a passionate and pure commitment to Torah lishmah - knowledge of Jewish Law exclusively for its own sake - and to Palestinian case law at that!

7. Samuel's tolerant responses to R. Yochanan's initial dismissals of his value as a scholar reflect, on one hand, pragmatic wisdom and appropriate politic sensibility: in order to win R. Yochanan's respect, he needed to do so on the latter's own terms. In addition, Samuel's responses may also reflect a sophisticated ideological pluralism: Samuel was broad-minded enough to empathize with those who are not willing to consider mathematics and astronomy as possessing intrinsic religious value, even when they were being utilized in the service of Halacha.

8. Responding to Samuel's second masterful presentation, R. Yochanan goes well beyond accommodating Samuel's desire to be addressed as "Rabbeinu". He immediately resolves to leave Israel for Bavel in order to see this great man: "I have a master in Bavel; I must go and see him!"

The purity of R. Yochanan's passion for Torah is manifest here. He harbors no egotistical fears for his own scholarly pre-eminence; there is no room in his mind or heart for jealousy of Samuel's superior mastery - in Torah as well as in the sciences. Quite the contrary: he appears thrilled to have discovered a scholar from whom he may increase his knowledge and his wisdom. His one desire, therefore, is simply to make personal connection with his newly discovered master.

9. To examine this passage from a thematic perspective:

A subtext of the sugya may be the issue of doubt – or more precisely, the unknowability of reality – whether it be:

[1] The reality of a person's scholarly worth;

[2] The reality of time (the calendar);

[3] The reality of many halachic truths;

[4] The truth content of an omen; or even

[5] The truth content of a verifiable fact of contemporary history (i.e., Is Samuel alive or dead?).

R. Yochanan had incorrectly underrated Samuel's scholarly worth and acted upon his incorrect assessment. By sending R. Yochanan his sixty-year calendar in response to this assessment and mistreatment, Samuel may have been symbolically hinting to him that he has no right to be self-assured in his impressions. Jewish calendrical law teaches that aspects of doubt permeate reality – at times even from the Divine perspective. According to biblical

halacha, the beginning of each month is determined not by means of astronomical computations but by the High Court after hearing the testimony of witnesses who saw (or who think they saw!) the new moon. A famous talmudic passage in Tractate Yuma asserts that even God does not know the precise date of Yom Kippur until the High Court sanctifies the month of Tishre. In the fifth century C.E., the method of declaring the new moon on the basis of testimony was abandoned in favor of a method based upon astronomical and mathematical calculations. This change was due to persecution and exile, which made the "testimony method" increasingly difficult to maintain. In Samuel's day, however, the "witness method" was still in use; his calendar, therefore, was only of theoretical value. Nevertheless, the very theoretical nature of that calendar could serve to remind R. Yochanan that from an ideal perspective, we (and God!) all depend upon the imperfect knowledge gained from the testimony of witnesses. Even time remains an unknowable, from an absolute perspective.

10. In his second, successful attempt, Samuel chooses the topic of doubtfully non-kosher or doubtfully impure food. Perhaps here as well, Samuel is symbolically conveying to R. Yochanan the concept that greatness in halachic mastery may primarily lie not in one's ability to resolve doubts and thereby live in a world of certitude. Rather, true scholarly greatness - and perhaps religious greatness as well - lies in one's willingness and ability to identify realms of uncertainty and to live in a sustained, respectful relationship with these realities nevertheless.

11. Wherein lies the superiority of the ""Master of Unresolved Halachic Doubts"? The student of practical Jewish Law is mandated to interpret individual phenomena - manifest in the world of observable empirical realities - in order to subsume them under divinely revealed, a priori, halachic categories. The superficial student, who does not struggle to define the halachic categories with maximum precision, and nuance, will experience fewer halachic doubts than will the more profound investigator of the law.

Likewise, the superficial observer of the empirical realities, who is not sensitive to subtle details which may individuate observable phenomena, will experience less difficulty than the keen observer in finding the precise halachic category under which to subsume each phenomenon. In other words, the superficial student and the imprecise observer both pigeonhole with ease.

Samuel's thirteen camel loads, therefore, certainly served to demonstrate his singular strengths, both as a halachist and as an observer of empirical realities. But in contemplating this material, Rav Yochanan understood that it indicated that Samuel possessed even more than outstanding intellectual and perceptive endowments. In all its quantitative magnitude, this material reflected Samuel's unique moral and spiritual qualities as well. The discovery of so many cases of halachic doubt demands not only talent but also intense life-long devotion, both to the conceptual

halachic study as well as to the observation of the realities of each case. Such devotion must be the function of a passionate religious commitment to the entire endeavor. This commitment, in turn, stems from two sources:

[1] An unswerving faith in the central and ultimate significance of God's Law, as well as

[2] An undying respect, even reverence, for G-d's material, observable world. This is the world of medicine and astronomy and of applied mathematics, of applied physics which leads to industry - the world which God yearns that His Law will govern and thereby sanctify. Samuel had devoted his life to mastering all available knowledge - as a physician, an astronomer, and a mathematician - in order to enable this realization of G-d's will.

12. At this point, we would expect R. Yochanan, finally convinced of Samuel's scholarly greatness, to address him as "Rabbeinu" in all subsequent epistles. What motivated him to undertake all the difficulties and dangers of travel in order to visit Samuel, even at the expense of temporarily leaving the Holy Land? R. Yochanan's decision becomes even more astounding in light of the rabbinic decree that anyone leaving the Land of Israel becomes ritually contaminated the moment he sets foot outside the borders of the Land. Raysh Lakish, R. Yochanan's esteemed student and colleague,

had expressed overt disdain towards the Babylonian Rabbinical leaders who failed to emigrate to Israel. R. Yochanan nevertheless prepared to embark upon a “pilgrimage” to Babylon in order to see Samuel!

13. On one hand, R. Yochanan’s decision to visit Samuel should be understood in light of rabbinic statements which stress the importance of experiencing personal contact with one’s teacher. This prioritization is based upon the assumption that there exists no substitute for the unmediated experience of a Torah scholar. (והיו עיניך רואות את מוריך) The Oral Law is essentially inseparable from the human Torah personality.

14. Furthermore, in planning his “pilgrimage to Babylon”, R. Yochanan perhaps desired to witness more than Samuel’s unique theological intellectual and scholarly strengths; he also may have desired to bask in Samuel’s less tangible characteristics, such as his personality traits and religious-intellectual passion as manifest in the foregoing epistolary exchange. For example, Samuel’s ability to integrate humility with self-esteem was dramatically manifest in his refusal to take offense at R. Yochanan’s dismissal of his calendar, while at the same time persisting in his attempt to demonstrate, on R. Yochanan’s own terms, his worthiness as a Torah scholar.

15. Why did Heaven choose to prevent R. Yochanan from taking the journey which would have exposed him to Samuel? Why did Heaven choose “not to trouble him” in this instance? Perhaps Heaven adjudicated that R. Yochanan’s very desire for personal exposure to Samuel was itself an indication that he had already fully internalized Samuel’s distinctive approach. The actual trip, with all the attendant dangers of travel, would have been superfluous and therefore inappropriate.

17. Why did Heaven, in preventing him from making the journey, choose the specific method of misleading him into believing that Samuel had already died? Perhaps no other message would have been powerful enough to neutralize R. Yochanan’s burning desire to pay homage to Samuel and learn Torah directly from his “newfound Rebbe”.

In light of the sugya’s thematic context, Heaven’s method here serves to reinforce for the reader the centrality of doubt as integral to the human condition. Paradoxically, R. Yochanan felt enlightened by the omen, but the Talmud informs the reader that (since Samuel was still alive) R. Yochanan remained ignorant of the truth. The omen thus failed to accurately enlighten, to reflect the reality that Samuel was still alive. This incident thus implies that even omens sent directly from Heaven, although they indicate a Divine message, are not necessarily reflective of empirical reality.

This aspect of the incident may also serve to remind the reader that our inability, at times, to accurately perceive reality may be a Heaven-sent blessing.

18. To return with this “doubt” theme to the opening of our sugya: Any human attempt to assess the value of another human being constitutes operating within the realm of doubt. The halachic obligation to judge others meritoriously may stem from this reality.

The Divine image that is man reflects not only the infinite value of his Source, but also His ultimate unknowability.