



Talmud Tales – Session 4 – Oven of Akhnai: Part 1

BT Baba Metzia 59b

Here we have learned: If one cut [a clay oven] into parts and put sand between the parts, R. Eliezer declares the oven broken-down and therefore insusceptible to uncleanness. And sages declare it susceptible.

And this is what is meant by the oven of Akhnai. Why the oven of Akhnai? Said R. Judah said Samuel, “It is because they surrounded it with argument as with a snake and proved it was insusceptible to uncleanness.” A Tannaite statement:

On that day R. Eliezer produced all of the arguments in the world, but they did not accept them from him. So he said to them, “If the law accords with my position, this carob tree will prove it.” The carob was uprooted from its place by a hundred cubits — and some say, four hundred cubits. They said to him, “There is no proof from a carob tree.” So he went and said to them, “If the law accords with my position, let the stream of water prove it.” The stream of water reversed flow. They said to him, “There is no proof from a stream of water.” So he went and said to them, “If the law accords with my position, let the walls of the school house prove it.” The walls of the school house tilted toward falling. R. Joshua rebuked them, saying to them, “If disciples of sages are contending with one another in matters of law, what business do you have?” They did not fall on

account of the honor owing to R. Joshua, but they also did not straighten up on account of the honor owing to R. Eliezer, and to this day they are still tilted. So he went and said to them, “If the law accords with my position, let the Heaven prove it!”

An echo came forth, saying, “What business have you with R. Eliezer, for the law accords with his position under all circumstances!” R. Joshua stood up on his feet and said, “‘It is not in heaven’ (Deu. 30:12).”

What is the sense of, “‘It is not in heaven’ (Deu. 30:12)”?

Said R. Jeremiah, “[The sense of Joshua’s statement is this:] For the Torah has already been given from Mount Sinai, so we do not pay attention to echoes, since you have already written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, ‘After the majority you are to incline’ (Exo. 23:2).”

R. Nathan came upon Elijah and said to him, “What did the Holy One, blessed be he, do at that moment?” He said to him, “He laughed and said, ‘My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me!’”