



Selichot 2020/5780 – The Ugly Man

BT Taanit 20a

Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority:

A person should always be as yielding as a reed and never as unyielding as a cedar.

There is the case of R. Elazar ben Shimon, who was coming from the house of his master in Migdal Gedor, riding on an ass and making his way along the river bank. He was in a very happy frame of mind and feeling good about himself because he had learned a great deal of Torah. An unusually ugly man came along. He said to him, “Peace be to you, my lord,” but he did not reply to him.

Then he said to him, “Empty head! what a beast [how ugly] you are! Is it possible that everyone in your town is as ugly as you are?”

He said to him, “I really couldn’t say, but go to the Craftsman who made me and tell him, ‘How ugly is that utensil that you have made!’”

When R. Elazar realized that he had sinned, he got off his ass and prostrated himself before the man, saying to him, “I beg you to forgive me.”

He said to him, “I shall not forgive you until you go to the Craftsman who made me and tell him, ‘How ugly is that utensil that you have made!’”

He ran after the man for three miles until he came to his town. The people of the town came out to meet him. They said toward him, “Peace be to you, my lord, my lord, my teacher, my teacher.”

He said to them, “Whom do you call, ‘my lord, my lord’?”

They said to him, “to the one who is going along after you.”

He said to them, “If this is a ‘my lord,’ may there not be many more like him in Israel.”

They said to him, “God forbid! and what has he done to you?”

He said to them, “Thus and so did he do to me.”

They said to him, “Nonetheless, forgive him, for he is a man who is great in Torah-learning.”

He said to them, “Lo, for your sake I forgive him, on the condition that he not make a habit of acting in that way.”

On that same day R. Elazar entered the great study-house that was his and gave an exposition: “A person should always be as yielding as a reed and never as unyielding as a cedar.