POST THE TALMUD / DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Oven of Akhnai

Bava Metzia 59a-59b | Beta teaching adaptation

THE CORE QUESTION

Who decides the law when a heavenly voice and the majority disagree?

THE ARGUMENT IN FOUR MOVES

1. Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages disagree about the ritual status of a reconstructed oven.

2. Eliezer invokes a tree, a stream, the study-house walls and finally a heavenly voice. His opponents reject these as deciding evidence.

3. Rabbi Yehoshua invokes 'It is not in heaven.' Rabbi Yirmeya explains: Torah has been given, and decisions follow the majority.

4. The story turns to Eliezer's exclusion and its painful consequences. Procedural authority does not erase responsibility for another person's dignity.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

Continue through Bava Metzia 59b: Rabbi Akiva delivers the news of exclusion, and the narrative explores grief and the power of causing hurt.

DISCUSS

1. What kinds of evidence should count in this dispute, and why?

2. How could a community uphold a decision while treating the dissenter with dignity?

3. Compare Eruvin 13b. Why might a heavenly voice matter there but not here?

TEACHING NOTE

Read the aftermath, not only the famous punchline. The oven concerns ritual impurity, not whether food is kosher.

Source: https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metzia.59b

Classroom thread: https://postthetalmud.com/akhnai/?mode=study&classroom=1

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