**The Deposition of Rabban Gamaliel: A Re-evaluation**

One of the most well-known stories of the Jabneh period describes Rabban Gamaliel's apparent removal from his position. The story appears in both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud, and many scholars have discussed its various aspects and tried to examine historical conclusions that can be deduced from it regarding the status of the *Nasi* in generation of Jabneh. While many of them tended to accept the story as a reliable historical account, others rejected this possibility. Haim Shapira, for example, extensively analyzed the version of the story both as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud and as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud, and concluded that the Tannaitic sources do not attest to the removal of Rabban Gamaliel from the *nesi’ut* or the appointment of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his place. Only in later Amoraic sources were independent traditions dealing with Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah reworked and combined into a single plotline that constitutes the nucleus of the story of his deposition. According to Shapira, the Amoraic adaptation appearing in the Jerusalem Talmud reflects the power struggles between the *Nasi* and the sages in the Land of Israel in the third century CE, while the adaptation in the Babylonian Talmud reflects realities of the Babylonian yeshiva in the fourth century CE. Other scholars reject this assertion and argue that these stories should not be viewed as sources to reach conclusions about historical reality in the Amoraic period.

Shapira’s careful and meticulous analysis of the story is very persuasive and it appears that we have no choice but to accept that Rabban Gamaliel was not removed from his position as *Nasi* during the generation that he served in Jabneh. Nevertheless, there are a number of details regarding the manner in which the early traditions were reworked in the days of the Amoraim that were not, in my opinion, sufficiently clarified in Shapira’s research, nor in those of other researchers who dealt with the subject. I hope to discuss them in the following essay.

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Two main difficulties emerge from the text of the story in the Jerusalem Talmud. First, there is no mention at all that Rabban Gamaliel was deposed from the *nesi’ut*, rather that the ‘people’ led to the termination of the discussion in the *beit ha-va’ad* while expressing a strong protest against Rabban Gamaliel. In this context it should be noted that the title *Nasi* is not mentioned at all throughout the story. Another difficulty lies in the fact that it does not say that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed to be the *Nasi*, rather: “They went and appointed Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah to the academy,” and in the continuation of the story: “"On the day on which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was seated in the academy". The terms *minuy* (appointment) and *Le-hoshiv be-yeshiva* (to be seated in the academy) describe the appointment of someone to the position of *hakham* (judge) in a legal institution and are not connected in any way to the position of the *nesi’ut* (Shapira claims that the yeshiva acted both as a rabbinic court in the matter of decision-making in Jewish law, and as an academic setting for clarifying various issues in Jewish law and Aggadah).

Scholars have tried to deal with these difficulties in various ways, but Shapira correctly argues that the Tannaitic sources from which the story is woven and the Amoraic sources that reworked them must be separated. He proves that the passage describing the termination of the discussion in the *beit ha-va’ad* is a Tannaitic source, as are a number of the other sources that are quoted – from mZevah 1.3 (parallel to mKetub 4.6), mYad 3.5, mYad 4.2 – which are brought to prove that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed to become *Nasi*. Still, as noted above, the first passage does not say that Rabban Gamaliel was deposed from being *Nasi*, and the *mishnayot* in Zebahim and Yadayim mention only that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was seated in the academy. Shapira argues that it is impossible to learn from the fact that the appointment was mentioned that this was an unusual event, arguing that it appears only in order to note the get-together in which the laws transmitted in the name of Ben Azzai that are cited in the Mishnah were established (“Meetings with a large number of participants are mentioned on several other occasions, as well as the appointment of other sages”). Even the Mishnah in Ketubot that describes a lecture on Jewish law presented by Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah does not connect it in any way with the position of the *Nasi*.

On the other hand, from the parable at the end of the story (referring to the sprinkling of the *mei hatat* of the Red Heifer, which is limited to priests) it is clear that there is a dispute between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah with regard to a specific position, and that the family lineage of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah – however dignified it may have been – pales in comparison with that of Rabban Gamaliel. The priesthood is a metaphor for the position of the *Nasi*. It appears that the individual telling the story is hinting to the fact that the *nesi’ut* in the Land of Israel is attributed to the House of King David. It is therefore clear that the complete story as we have it was developed only after the time of Rabbi Judah the Prince, for only in his day does the claim arise attributing the Gamaliel dynasty to Hillel and to the House of David (for additional proofs supporting the argument that the story, as we have it, was written in the third century, CE, see…) .

In Shapira's opinion, the story developed against the backdrop of the confrontations between the *Nasi* and the rabbinic sages that characterized the third century CE. These confrontations raised questions regarding the status of the Gamaliel dynasty and its relationship to the *nesi’ut*. The story before us raises the possibility of appointing a *Nasi* from among the sages, even though he may not have significant family standing (Rabbi Akiba) or to appoint as *Nasi* one of the sages from a priestly family (Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah). The conclusion of the story, however, is that in the end there is no substitute for the *Nasi* from the Gamaliel dynasty, even though his authority is limited and the sages have the power to remove him from his position if they find fault with him. In light of this, Shapira suggests that the story developed within a circles of sages who, on the one hand, recognized and accepted the unshakable leadership of the *Nasi* from the House of David, but on the other hand, perceived themselves as an independent and powerful force (one third century sage who presents this position is Rabbi Yohanan). These sages reworked the Tannaitic sources in order to create a new story describing the confrontation between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah over the role of the *nesi’ut*. The ancient tradition of ceasing to sit in the *beit ha’vaad* turned into a story about the removal of Rabban Gamaliel from the *nesi’ut*; the lecture on Jewish law presented by Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah before the sages in Kerem b’Yavneh became a lecture that he delivered to students who sat before him in rows, as in a vineyard (*kerem*).

Shapira's analysis of Talmudic sources is an example of how the study of Talmudic stories has developed in the last generation. In the past, researchers believed that each such story was based on a factual historical event, which can be uncovered by "peeling off" the layers of legend, allegory and tendentious biases. (This was the dominant approach to historical research in the 19th century, although there are contemporary scholars who understand it that way, as well. I am not relating to the question of the formation and editing of the various stories in rabbinic literature and whether we have the original version of any Talmudic tradition, or whether such a text can be reproduced. Even if we assume that we have an original version of a story, there is still room to question what the author's intention may have been and the historical credibility of the story.) Many scholars today claim that the stories appearing in the Talmud are simply literary works that do not presume to describe actual historical events. The most prominent representative of this approach is Yonah Frankel, but it should be noted that the fact that a story can be analyzed from a literary perspective does not preclude the possibility that it is based on a historical event, nor keep us from deriving historical details from it. In other cases, the stories express a variety of social or political trends that reflect the narrator's time. In this context it should be noted that from Shapira's words it is not clear whether, in his opinion, the Amoraic editors of the story in the Jerusalem Talmud reworked the Tannaic traditions in order to convey a contemporary political message to the people of the third century CE – that it was edited in this way purposefully. It appears difficult to accept this possibility because then we would have expected the issue of the *nesi’ut* to appear explicitly in the story. Why would the main topic be left out? It is only at the end of the story that we learn that Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah are competing for the same position, which is not even mentioned by name! Had the Amoraic narrator wanted to convey a political message about the status of the *Nasi* at that time, he certainly could have made up a story describing a struggle between the Nasi and the sages of the generation of Jabneh, and allow the audience to draw the necessary conclusions. But it is inconceivable that he would left out mentioning the institution of the *Nasi* in such a story. Therefore, it appears more likely that this is not a deliberate act of editing but an innocent Amoraic interpretation of ancient traditions, and that Shapira's approach to the story of the deposition is more suited to the second position mentioned above. In other words, the third-century Amoraic editor innocently interpreted the Tannaitic traditions in an anachronistic manner, in accordance with his own contemporary reality. Although the position of *Nasi* is not mentioned at all in these traditions, the editor thought that Rabban Gamaliel was deposed from the presidency and that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, who ‘was seated in the academy,’ was appointed *Nasi* in his place.

This suggestion, however, is also difficult for several reasons. First, it should be noted that in the Tannaitic sources there is no connection between the traditions regarding the termination of the discussion in the *beit ha-va’ad* and the traditions of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah’s being seated in the academy. What, then, led the Amoraic editor to link them? (this question is also left unanswered in Moshe Shoshan’s discussion). In addition, Shapira notes that one cannot deduce from the mention of the day when Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was seated in the academy that this was an extraordinary event, as we find references to the appointment of other sages in other places in rabbinic literature, as well. If so, however, one may ask why the Amoraic editor chose to attach to the tradition of the termination of the discussion in the *beit ha-va’ad* (that is, the tradition describing the removal of Rabban Gamaliel from the *nesi’ut*, according to the Amoraic interpretation), specifically the tradition of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah being seated in the academy, rather than an alternative story about a different sage?

It should be noted that the difficulties noted above are not found in the parallel account that is found in the Babylonian Talmud. As Shapira has already pointed out, the second part of the story in the Babylonian Talmud, which explicitly mentions the removal of Rabban Gamaliel from his post and the appointment of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his place, is well organized and is characterized by linguistic and stylistic unity. Shapira writes: 'It can be assumed that sources for both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud were similar, and there is no need to assume that there were other sources… The Babylonian story is characterized by an attempt to clarify and uncover details that remain obscure and hidden in the Jerusalem Talmud. The literary adaptation involves the development of the story and the integration of additional Tannaitic sources."

Indeed, we find that the Babylonian Talmud mentions additional clashes between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Yehoshua (Ginzberg suggests that references to Tractate Rosh Hashana and to Tractate Behorot made their way into the body of the text by way of notes written by copyists in the page margins. It is possible, however, that the very mention of stories that are told elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud (even without reference to the exact source) is an indication of late editing. The story of the confrontation between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Yehoshua regarding the status of the evening prayer is identical to the story of the confrontation between them regarding the laws of first-born animals in Behorot 33a in the Babylonian Talmud (which has no parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud. It is possible that the repetition of the story indicates late editing. According to Rubinstein, the story of Rabbi Zadok was created following the story about the evening prayer, but only after the addition referring to it in the story in the Babylonian Talmud in Berakhot was inserted by later editors. He then presents additional proofs for the later editing of the story in the Babylonian Talmud. He also presents other proofs that the story that appears in the Babylonian Talmud is the work of later editors). It explains mber 1.5 in light of the miracle that happened to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah ‘s hair; describes the events that took place on the day that Rabban Gamaliel was deposed (according to the Babylonian Talmud, every time the expression “on that day” appears in rabbinic literature, it is a reference to the day that Rabban Gamaliel was removed from his position); it even describes in detail the compromise that was eventually worked out between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah (not his appointment to become the *av bet din*, as appears in the Jerusalem Talmud, but a division of labor between him and Rabban Gamaliel, each of whom lectured on different weeks in the *bet midrash*). However, in contrast with Shapira’s argument, the Babylonian Talmud did not merely expand on a smaller story told in the Jerusalem Talmud, for all the Tannaitic sources from which the Jerusalem Talmud derives that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed to the *nesi’ut* are absent from the Babylonian Talmud: mZevah 1.3; mYad 3.5; mYad 4.2 that mention the day when Rabbi Elazar be Azariah was seated in the academy, and mKetub 4.6 that described the lecture given by Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah before the sages in Kerem b’Yavneh. That is to say, in contrast with the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud makes no attempt to prove from earlier sources that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed to the position of *Nasi,* rather simply states it as a known, historical fact. For this reason, the problems that are raised by the story as related in the Jerusalem Talmud, do not appear when reading the story as told in the Babylonian Talmud (it seems unlikely to me that the Babylonian Talmud chose to ‘censor’ the version as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud in order to avoid these problems, since it introduces other sources that raise similar problems. The Babylonian Talmud attempts to derive the nature of the arrangement between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah from tSota 7.9, but it this can be refuted. The same applies to the Babylonian Talmud’s claim that Tractate Eduyot was taught on the day Rabban Gamaliel was removed from his post, or that wherever the phrase "on that day" is mentioned, it refers to the day Rabban Gamaliel was ousted from office. Furthermore, even though these statements appear in Tractate Berakhot in the Babylonian Talmud as a quotation from a *baraita*, it is possible that it is an Amoraic statement. It seems, therefore, that the Babylonian Talmud was unfamiliar with the text of the story as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud. See below).

This comparison between the story as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud sharpens the problem that I raised above regarding the version in the Jerusalem Talmud, namely why did the Amoraic editor combine the Tannaitic tradition about seating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the academy with that of Rabban Gamaliel being forced to suspend his lecture in the *beit ha-va’ad*?

It is first important to note that in contrast with Shapira’s contention, to the best of my knowledge there are few mentions of sages being seated in the academy to be found throughout rabbinic literature. Sifra Dt 16 mentions the seating of Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri and Rabbi Elazar Chasma in the academy, and t'ed 3.1 mentions the seating of Mena@hem ben Signay in the academy. In both of those cases, the fact that these individuals were seated in the academy is not just mentioned in passing, rather each of them is noted for a specific reason. In the first case, the midrash is expressing the level of commitment required from people who are serving in a public capacity, and Rabban Gamaliel’s admonition of Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri and Rabbi Elazar ben Hasma, who were seated in the academy by him, serves as an excellent example of this. In the second case, the seating of Menahem in the academy came as something of a shock to the community. It is likely that Menahem was not a scholar, and it was only because of the testimony that he presented that he was so honored. His appointment led to criticism, which is why Mehahem took an oath, “Thus and so! – if I am not at the head of all who come after me!” If so, then as opposed to Shapira’s statement, aside from the tradition about Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Tannaitic literature has only two other instances where we are told that sages were seated in the academy. In both of those cases there is a specific reason why we are told that they were seated, either to teach a moral lesson (in the first case), or because the appointment itself was unusual.

In light of this, I would like to suggest that in the sources that discuss seating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the academy, the appointment is also mentioned because there was something unique about it. Although the Tannaitic sources do not provide any additional information on this matter, in view of the difficulties mentioned above, it seems to me that we have no choice but to conclude that there must have been some connection between the termination of the lecture in the *beit ha-va’ad* and seating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the academy. This connection was known to the Amoraic editor, and it serves as the basis of the story in the Jerusalem Talmud. I do not intend to claim that Rabban Gamliel was deposed from the *nesi’ut* (in fact, Rabban Gamaliel's status as a national leader is a point of dispute among scholars and it is doubtful whether he held the title *Nasi*) and that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed *Nasi* in his place. That story is the invention of the Amoraic editor. However, it is possible that the termination of the lecture in the *beit ha-va’ad* was accompanied by a suspension – at least a temporary suspension – of Rabban Gamaliel's authority as someone who was ‘seated in the academy,’ and replaced by Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah.

Related to this it is worth noting that while there are scholars who argue that during the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud there was no operating Sanhedrin (G. Elon argued that during the Second Temple period, as well as during the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Jewish community was led by the Sanhedrin and the *nesi’ut*, and that after the destruction of the Temple the rabbinic sages became the dominant force in the Sanhedrin, with the *Nasi* acting as its head. The Sanhedrin served both as a legislative institution deciding questions of Jewish law and as an academic institute. Many scholars have accepted this approach. Y. Levin argued that the Sanhedrin no longer operated after the Bar Kokhba revolt, and all that existed were local study halls or rabbinic courts of sages who did not enjoy positions of national leadership. D. Goldbart followed this with the claim that already in the generation of Jabneh – that is, after the destruction of the Second Temple – neither the Sanhedrin nor any other parallel institution existed, and Rabban Gamaliel led the Jewish community on his own, although he does admit that there was a central rabbinic court that operated in Jabneh. A more radical approach suggests there was no central study hall operating in Jabneh in a formal manner, and that the Tannaitic study halls were groups of rabbis and students that operated independently without any kind of overarching framework), many of them admit that there was a formal, central institution during the Jabneh period, even if its authority and functions are not entirely clear (as noted, even Goldbart admits that there was a rabbinic court operating in Jabneh that had a level of public status [‘The court of Rabban Gamaliel’], although he argues that it was a council of the *Nasi* that operated under his authority. Although there are various sources that mention meetings of the sages without the mention of Rabban Gamaliel, he believes that these were only academic meetings that did not have formal status, or that they took place at the meetings of the council *nesi’ut*, which was subordinate to the *Nasi*. Many scholars view the Tosefta, Sanhedrin 7, as a type of protocol of the proceedings of the rabbinic court in Jabneh. Rosen-Zvi concludes, however, that this chapter is “The result of a literary act of authorship that binds together different materials according to a certain thematic logic,” but that it is not a true protocol. Still, an analysis of the third part of the unit reveals that it deals with guidelines for establishing legal rulings specifically for students in the central study hall. He therefore concludes that “We must revisit the direction of the new approach that views the Tannaitic study halls as nothing more than groups of rabbis and students that operated independently without any kind of overarching framework”), where, among other things, processes of legislation and rulings on Jewish law were taking place, together with instruction for students. It appears that the expression ‘to be seated in the academy’ refers to this institution, and its meaning is that the scholar is now a member of the central rabbinic court, who takes part in the discussions of the sages and is included among those individuals who ultimately decide the law (Shapira emphasizes that there is no proof that ‘to be seated in the academy’ is connected with someone being appointed as a judge in civil matters). Scholars discuss whether there was a fixed number of sages in the rabbinic court in Jabneh. Alongside the sources mentioned above where 72 scholars are enumerated, there are others that count 85 scholars, 32, 24, and even five scholars. Elon argues that ordained sages, members of the rabbinic court, sat in different cities, and gathered together on occasion for deliberations and to render decisions, which is why we find different numbers of participants (Shapira suggests that the fact that there was no definitive number of participants is what leads to the ruling that “a rabbinical court cannot rescind the statements of another rabbinical court, unless it is superior to it in wisdom and in number”). It is possible, however, that they did not want to reduce the overall number of ordained sages, so when Rabban Gamaliel’s status as an ordained sage was removed, they chose to ordain Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah (Ginzberg writes that “in the event that it was necessary to restore the Sanhedrin of 23 to its full number, a candidate was chose from among those sitting in the first row.” He proves that the term *semikha* (usually translated as ‘ordination’) in Sanhedrin 4:4 does not refer to the appointment, but to filling a position that was missing).

It appears that seating Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in place of Rabban Gamaliel made a great impression and was preserved as a Tannaitic tradition from the days of Jabneh. There is no need to assume that this tradition reached the Amoraim in written form. As some scholars have recently noted, ancient rabbinical traditions were passed down from generation to generation both as texts and as oral material, and it is also possible that in the course of the transfer the material changed from one to the other and back again. It is possible that an oral tradition from the days of Jabneh describing a confrontation between Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Yehoshua and the seating of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the place of Rabban Gamaliel reached both the Amoraim in the Land of Israel and the Amoraim of Babylon, and each of them analyzed and interpreted it independently. The Jerusalem Talmud interpreted it anachronistically, presenting the seating of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the academy as his appointment as *Nasi*. It interpreted several Tannaitic sources in this spirit, and added them to the ancient tradition. It even developed a discussion of the question of who could serve as a worthy candidate for the *nesi’ut*, concluding that there can be no substitute for the Gamaliel family. In contrast with the Jerusalem Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud makes no attempt to use Tannaitic sources to prove that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed as Nasi, rather it accepts that as a given based on the ancient tradition that it interprets anachronistically as referring to the happenings in the academy. While doing so, it attempts to connect events that are recorded in other Tannaitic sources to the occasion of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah’s appointment to head the academy (according to its understanding of the matter).

Conclusion

Many scholars have accepted the story of Rabbi Gamaliel's ouster from the *nesi’ut* and the appointment of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his stead as a historical fact, dealing with the difficulties that arise from this assertion in a variety of different ways. Recently, other scholars have claimed that the sources do not describe the removal of Rabban Gamaliel from the *nesi’ut* nor the appointment of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in his place. This approach, however, also raises difficulties, as I have pointed out above. In this article, I suggest an intermediate approach, arguing that the story of Rabban Gamaliel’s deposition, as it is presented in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, is, indeed, ahistorical, but it represents an Amoraic adaptation of an ancient tradition. On the one hand, this adaptation reflects the social reality of that period in the Land of Israel and in Babylon. On the other hand, I believe that an analysis of the story suggests that this ancient tradition, which had not been preserved, in some way made a connection between the termination of the deliberation in the *beit ha-va’ad* (according to the Jerusalem Talmud) or the study hall (according to the Babylonian Talmud) under Rabban Gamaliel’s leadership with seating Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria in the academy. A hint that there is, indeed, a historical kernel in this story can be seen in the very mention of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's being seated in the academy in two Tannaitic sources. As I have shown above, this points to the fact that this was an unusual event.

A similar suggestion was made by L. Ginzber and S. Honig who suggested that Rabban Gamaliel was not deposed from the *nesi’ut*, rather that he was removed from his position as head of the academy in Jabneh, and that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed to replace him in that position (they believe that the reference to ‘72 sages’ mentioned by Ben Azzai is also connected with this appointment). The position of *Rosh Ha-Yeshiva* – Head of the Academy – is never mentioned in the story, however, and the very title *Rosh Yeshiva* was unknown during the Tannaitic period, which leads to the conclusion that their approach must be rejected.

Rabban Gamaliel’s political status is also subject to disagreement among scholars. It is not clear what degree of recognition, if any, he received from the Roman government, what were his powers as a national leader, and whether the title *Nasi* was used even in his day. In light of all this, I believe that a more limited historical reconstruction should be offered, which should remain as close as possible to the information available to us. All that the story actually says is that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was appointed as *hakham* – a judge – and I have argued that this is connected with an ancient tradition connected with the termination of the deliberation in the *beit ha-va’ad* being led by Rabban Gamaliel. Therefore, the only conclusion that can be reached is that Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah was seated in the academy to replace Rabban Gamaliel.