YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #27: The Legacy of Yehoshua ben Gamla**

Having spent the past three *shiurim* discussing various aspects of the mitzva of teaching Torah, it is worth dedicating a *shiur* to exploring the legacy of an individual who is credited by the rabbis with having implemented mandatory universal Jewish education.

*Bava Batra* (21a) credits Yehoshua ben Gamla, who was concerned for orphans who had no parent to teach them Torah, with precisely this achievement. For this, he is lauded for having ensured that Torah would not be forgotten from the Jewish people. It is worth citing the Gemara and sketching Ben Gamla’s biographical background:

For Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: However, remember this man for good, namely Yehoshua ben Gamla, for if not for him, Torah would have been forgotten from Israel.

For originally, whoever had a father, [the father] would teach him Torah; whoever had no father would not learn Torah. What was expounded? "And you shall teach them" - and you yourselves shall teach.

They decreed that teachers of children should be set up in Jerusalem. What was expounded? "For out of Zion shall go forth the law."

But still, whoever had a father, [the father] would bring him up [to Jerusalem] and teach him; whoever didn't have a father would not go up and learn. They decreed that [teachers] should be set up in each and every district. And they would bring them in at around age 16 or 17, and anyone whose teacher was angry at him, he would kick him out.

Until Yehoshua ben Gamla came and decreed that teachers of children should be set up in each and every province and in each and every city, and [that] they are brought in at around age 6 or 7.

The questions suggest themselves immediately. First, Yehoshua Ben Gamla is not exactly a household name. Who is he? And how might his biography be relevant to a fuller understanding of his legacy?

Second, the choice to situate the *yeshivot* in Yerushalayim is noteworthy. Why was this city chosen, and what is the significance of the move to establish centers of learning in other locations?

Third, the Gemara's emphasis on creating a learning space for those lacking parents seems to be superfluous. If the Gemara's goal is to establish Ben Gamla's long-term contribution of universal Torah education, why not simply state that Ben Gamla mandated universal Torah education? Why the backstory?

Finally, our *sugya* is not the only context in which Yehoshua Ben Gamla is remembered for good. The Mishna (*Yoma* 3:9) records that he is also remembered positively for having crafted golden boxes to hold the lots of the two goats on Yom Kippur (the original boxes had been made of wood). Interestingly, the Mishna uses similar phraseology to that of the Gemara in *Bava Batra*: "he is remembered for good." This is unusual. What are we to make of the fact that the rabbis twice recognized Ben Gamla for good?

A quick biographical sketch sheds new light on our protagonist. According to the Gemara (*Yevamot* 61a), he was married to the widow Marta bat Baytus, who was active in the time immediately following the *churban* (*Gittin* 56a). According to the Gemara, his wife purchased the high priesthood on his behalf from the king for two coins; the Gemara thus seems to indicate that he was unworthy of the position. In fact, elsewhere the Talmud (*Yoma* 18a) cites the case of Ban Gamla as evidence that the criteria for serving as high priest during the First Temple period (strength, attractiveness, wisdom and wealth) were dropped during the Second. According to Josephus (*Wars* 4:5:2), Ben Gamla served as *Kohen Gadol* within the last five to six years of the Second Temple. He went on to be killed in a bloody battle for control of the high priesthood and Temple roughly two years before the *churban* in 68 C.E.

All this background raises additional questions. If he was unworthy for the position, why do two Talmudic sources emphasize that Yehoshua was remembered for good? The *sugyot* seem to contradict one another regarding the quality of his character. Moreover, given the chaos swirling around the Temple in the years prior to the *churban*, Ben Gamla's decision to purchase a gold box for the Yom Kippur lottery seems a bit strange. As the Romans increasingly controlled the Temple and priesthood, was it really the right time to invest in enhancing the Temple service? What kind of long-term impact could it possibly have?

These difficulties led a group of *rishonim* and later commentaries (*Tosafot Yeshanim Yevamot* 61a, *Ritva* *Bava Batra* 21a s.v. *Vihoshua*, Aharon Hyman in *Toldot Tanaim Va-Amoraim*) to propose that in fact the *sugyot* are discussing two different personalities by the name of Yehoshua Ben Gamla, one who lived approximately 150 years before the *churban*, and another who lived immediately prior. This fits nicely with the Gemara *Yevamot*, which records that Marta purchased the high priesthood from King Yanai, the second Hasmonean king, who ruled from 103-76 B.C.E.

This conjecture, however, is beset by significant difficulties. What is the likelihood that there were two individuals by the name of Yehoshua ben Gamla who were married to different women by the name of Marta bat Baytus? Moreover, as *Dikdukei Sofrim* notes, not all recensions of the Gemara have Alexander Yanai listed as the king who sold the priesthood.

This leads to another possibility, adopted by Tosafot in *Bava Batra* (21a s.v. *Zakhur*) among others, which maintains that there was only one Yehoshua Ben Gamla. If so, how do we account for the discrepancies regarding his character? Tosafot opines that he was not a bad guy; there were simply other more qualified candidates around. Alternatively, *Ritva* (*Bava Batra* s.v. *Vihoshua*) suggests that although Ben Gamla was originally unqualified, he became righteous over the course of his tenure as *Kohen Gadol*.

We might suggest a third possibility. Despite having occupied the role of *Kohen Gadol*, Yehoshua ben Gamla - note that he never receives the appellation rabbi in the Gemara - was an unlikely candidate to be recalled positively. In many respects, his corrupt appointment exemplified the degradation of the high priesthood and the sacrificial service toward the end of the Second Temple period. Yet the Gemara goes out of its way to suggest that he was nonetheless remembered for good. Refusing to bow to the pressures of the age, he chose to enhance the boxes used for the Yom Kippur service. And instead of sitting by idly watching the Roman carnage, Ben Gamla developed a sprawling educational network, enabling the Jewish people to survive the traumatic period that was sure to follow.

We can now understand the significance of Yerushalayim no longer serving as the sole Torah center. It wasn't merely a question of increasing the scope of places where children might learn. Due to the impending chaos, Ben Gamla understood that for practical purposes Yerushalayim could no longer serve as the primary Torah center. It was simply too dangerous. More than that, the Jewish community needed to transition to a model in which Torah study and Torah values did not emanate from a single, primary locus of Jewish life. Refusing to allow the rabbis' skepticism dissuade him from his sacred work, Ben Gamla proved resilient and made a transformative contribution to Jewish continuity.

Coming full circle, this message characterizes not just the life of Yehoshua ben Gamla but also the fatherless children he helped to educate. Ben Gamla's mission was not just to provide Jewish education in every local community but, most important, for every single child. It is our mandate to create Torah learning opportunities for everyone, he insisted, including the underprivileged who might otherwise be excluded.

The legacies of Ben Gamla and the schools he founded are one and the same: everyone has the ability to make a lasting contribution to the Jewish learning and continuity. It is for good reason that the rabbis remembered Yehoshua ben Gamla, an unlikely hero, for good.