

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THAT WHICH YOU MUST FEAR

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Toward the end of Johnny Carson's reign as host of the Tonight Show, the jokes in his opening monologue almost always fell flat. People still watched, because his self-deprecating recoveries were funny! Could he have skipped the jokes and made an entire show of recoveries? I doubt that would have worked. Nonetheless, this week's essay is just the recovery from a series of failed parshah-related divrei Torah.

Shimon HaAmsuni (but some say: Nechemyah HaAmsuni) would interpret (be doresh) all the ets in the Torah.

When he reached et Hashem your G-d you must fear (Devarim 6:13), he stepped away (=was poresh).

His students said to him: Rebbe, all the ets that you have been doresh, what is to become of them?

He said to them: Just like I received reward for the derishah, I will receive reward for the perishah.

Until Rabbi Akiva came and interpreted: et Hashem your G-d you must fear – to include Torah scholars.

The Babylonian Talmud cites the story of Shimon HaAmsuni in two contexts (one context makes three appearances, so four citations total). On Pesachim 22b, Kiddushin 57a, and Bava Kamma 41b, the Talmud deduces that a tanna derives the consensus prohibition against benefiting from the skin of an executed bull from the phrase “*et* its meat” in Exodus 28:28. Other tannas derive that prohibition from other aspects of the text; what meaning do they assign to *et*? None at all - they are not *doresh* it, as per Shimon HaAmsuni. Similarly, on Bekhorot 6b, the Talmud deduces that Rabbi Shimon derives the consensus position that camel milk is not kosher from “*et* the camel” (I’m not sure whether from Vayikra 11:4 or Devarim 14:7), whereas the rabbis who derive that prohibition from a different textual feature are not *doresh* the *et*.

The word *et* grammatically indicates that the subsequent noun is the object rather than the subject of the relevant verb. Why was Shimon HaAmsuni unable to interpret the *et* in Devarim 6:13? We can’t know for certain, as no other interpretations of *et* are cited in his name (in fact, this story may be the only record we have of him at all, and this record is unsure of his name). But the Talmudic passages above suggest that he consistently used *et* in halakhic contexts *lerabot*, to include, as if it meant “with”, extending the verb to a noun

other than its object. Shimon HaAmsuni was unwilling to say that the Torah commands fearing anything together with Hashem your G-d.

Rashi to Pesachim 22b contends that Shimon HaAmsuni withdrew all his previous interpretations when confronted with Devarim 6:13. (see also Rabbeinu Gershom to Bekhorot 6b).

(This tanna) was not doresh the word et as an inclusion, because he held like Shimon HaAmsuni, who explained all the ets in the Torah as inclusions, but when he reached “et Hashem your G-d you must fear”, he said: “What will I include to fear alongside Him?” So he was poresh from them all, and withdrew all the prior inclusions that he had been doresh, because since this one did not come to include – none of them came to include.

Rashi seems correct based on the Talmudic passages above, which identify positions that refuse to use other *ets* as inclusions with Shimon HaAmsuni. Similarly, R. Avraham ben HaRambam (Responsum 82) cites Shimon HaAmsuni as a role model for his willingness to admit error and recant.

Tosafot (Menachot 11b) notes, however, that on Sotah 17a, the Talmud explains that a dispute between Rabbi Yosay and Rabbi Meir comes down to the question of whether one is *doresh* an *et*, and says the same on Menachot 11b about a dispute between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Shimon, and that Shimon HaAmsuni is not cited in those contexts! Furthermore, they bring evidence that Rabbi Shimon was *doresh* some *ets* but not others! It seems that Tosafot saw Shimon HaAmsuni’s full-scale retreat as unnecessary.

Or, perhaps Tosafot thought that Shimon HaAmsuni regarded *et* in Devarim 6:13 as an absolute disproof not because he couldn’t explain it, but because he was unwilling to accept any explanation. What Rabbi Akiva brought to the table was not imagination but rather theological *chutzpah* – he was willing to offer an explanation that Shimon HaAmsuni found religiously intolerable.

Chatam Sofer (Pesachim 22b) takes Tosafot a step further by suggesting that Shimon HaAmsuni agreed with Rabbi Akiva substantively but was unwilling to make the interpretation public; he “stepped away” voluntarily. This however does not square with the Talmud’s presenting him as relevant to positions that refuse to read *et* as an inclusion in other contexts.

נחמיה עמסוני שימש את רבי עקיבה עשרים ושנים שנה.
הוא היה אומר: "אתים גמין – ריבויין; אכין ורקין – מיעוטיין".
אמר ליה: מהו דין דכתיב את יי אלהיך תירא וגו'!
אמר ליה: אותו ואת תורתו

Nechemyah HaAmsuni disciplined under (shimesh et) Rabbi Akiva for twenty two years.

He (Rabbi Akiva) would say: "ets and gams are inclusions; akhs and raks are exclusions".

He said to him: "What is the meaning of et Hashem your G-d you must fear"?

He said to him: "Him and His Torah".

Regardless, Chatam Sofer's suggestion points up another peculiarity of the Talmud's usage. The simple reading of the story is that Rabbi Akiva's derashah disproves the disproof, so that all previous *derashot* of *et* as inclusions are rehabilitated. Yet the Talmud declares that some of Rabbi Akiva's students (Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Meir) aligned with Shimon HaAmsuni and refused to use *ets* as inclusions!

There is another way to understand the story. Perhaps Shimon HaAmsuni retracted nothing; instead, he declared that "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds". Alternatively, he accepted the value of consistency but rejected the notion that his theory was wrong because he couldn't **yet** explain everything. Or, he did not allow a desire for consistency to force him to accept the best available explanation – he was willing to hold out for something better, even if leaving a gap meanwhile seemed to weaken his overall theory of interpretation.

I will add that Shimon HaAmsuni had an ear for language and a sense of humor. His reply to his students rhymes memorably while subtly punning – the root *p-r-sh* also means to interpret. This pun was honored by Rabbi Yehoshua Falk (1555-1614), who named components of his commentaries on the Tur "Derishah" and "Perishah" respectively. Possibly Rabbi Falk also meant to convey that Shimon HaAmsuni's "stepping away" did not reflect actual disengagement.

Many, many commentators wonder why Shimon HaAmsuni did not simply plug in to Devarim 6:13 whatever he thought was included by the *et* in the second verse of the Shema: "You must love *et* Hashem your G-d". The geonic work Kallah Rabbati (3:13) has just such an inclusion:

as Scripture writes: You must love et Hashem your G-d – et comes to include the Torah.

Perhaps Shimon haAmsuni thought that one can love a text but not fear it. But *yir'ab* of course can mean awe rather than fear, and one can certainly be in awe of a text.

The Yerushalmi (Berakhot 9:5, Sotah 9:5) introduces its HaAmsuni story immediately following its report of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom, which centers on his happiness at fulfilling "*You must love Hashem your G-d*".

The Yerushalmi's version (similar to Kallah Rabbati) seems to have *et* including the Torah itself rather than its expositors. Moreover, it has no element of withdrawal of recantation at all. Rabbi Akiva was the one who first utilized *ets* as inclusions, and Nechemyah HaAmsuni raised the challenge from Devarim 6:13. In the Bavli, Shimon haAmsuni seems to be the teacher, and Rabbi Akiva the student who eventually rescues his work; in the Yerushalmi, Rabbi Akiva is the teacher, Nechemyah HaAmsuni is the student, and Rabbi Akiva is simply answering a question.

And yet – why does it take twenty two years for Nechemyah HaAmsuni to ask this question? Perhaps he had too much *yir'ab* for Rabbi Akiva. Perhaps people who naturally fear their teachers should be the most resistant to believing that this is a mitzvah, and certainly to believing that this is a mitzvah comparable to the mitzvah of fearing G-d.

It's not clear how the Bavli and Yerushalmi stories relate. *Alei Tamar* tries to reconcile them; I assume that academic Talmudists see them as alternatives; and I'm tempted to read them as consecutive. Perhaps Shimon HaAmsuni's son Nechemyah apprenticed himself to the man who endorsed his father's abandoned lifework, but took twenty-two years to work up the courage to ask how he dealt with the question that had crushed his father. Maybe Rabbi Akiva gave the son a different answer than he would later teach publicly, because the son knew that his father had rejected that answer.

From a halakhic perspective, Rabbi Akiva's answer in the Bavli has certainly triumphed; and yet I think it is still worth thinking about why Shimon HaAmsuni refused to consider it. To some extent, *yir'ab* of Torah entails *yir'ab* of Torah scholars; and yet there are certainly times when *yir'ab* for Torah scholars leads us to have insufficient reverence for the text itself, and for the will of G-d.

Shabbat shalom!

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