

Variations on a Theme: Nitschuni Banai (B. Baba Metsia 59b)  
By Gilat Yarden Omer

NOTE BY RABBI ABRAMS: THESE INSIGHTS COME FROM ONE OF MY STUDENTS IN THE SIEGAL LONG DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM (<http://www.siegalcollege.edu/>). WE STUDIED THE STORY OF RABBI ELIEZER'S FIGHT IN THE ACADEMY (B. BABA METSIA 59a-b) WHEREIN RABBI YEHOSHUA ESSENTIALLY TELLS GOD TO STAY OUT OF THE ARGUMENTS THAT OCCUR IN THE ACADEMY. RABBI NATAN, A FRIEND OF RABBI MEIR AND SOMETHING OF AN OPPONENT OF RABBAN GAMLIEL (THE HEAD OF THE ACADEMY), LEARNS FROM ELIJAH THAT GOD, UPON HEARING RABBI YEHOSHUA'S REBUKE LAUGHED AND SAID, "MY CHILDREN HAVE OVERPOWERED ME! MY CHILDREN HAVE OVERPOWERED ME!" HOWEVER, THERE IS NO REAL PUNCTUATION IN THE TEXT AND GILAT YARDEN OMER GIVES US, HERE, A PHENOMENAL NUMBER OF BEAUTIFUL VARIANTS OF HOW THOSE WORDS MAY HAVE BEEN SAID.

Why the repetition? Why is the phrase repeated in the exact same manner two times? A few thoughts, word playing and ideas come to mind from varied directions.

One can ask: *who* said it twice? Who is it that repeats the two words? Did God indeed say it twice? Perhaps not. Perhaps whoever is passing this along is the one adding words. As Rabbi Moshe Berger tells us when we examine biblical narrative: hyperbole in the text, makes for hypersensitivity in the reader/listener. Let's be oversensitive and suspicious... Eliyahu Hanavi is so amazed or mortified at the phrase he hears from God (not to mention "*chiyech*"- a smile! Do we dare imagine that?) that Eliyahu hears it once but when telling it he is still so discombobulated by the memory that he repeats God's answer for emphasis or clarification. Or this could have happened in the third generation of telling, when Rabbi Natan is the one telling it. Rabbi Natan finishes quoting his conversation with Eliyahu by compounding the last two words. His motive? We can only guess. Then again, maybe it was exactly as God said: the same two words, said twice. *Nitzhuni Banai, Nitzhuni Banai.*

One can meander on another, often traveled path, and decide to ignore the vowels and look at the three letters. Nun, Tzadi, Chet has more than one flat meaning. We know of *Netzach* translated as eternity, of *menatzeach* and *menutzach*, the winner and the loser. We recognize the familiar phrase of the conductor or poet musician of *Tehilim... lamenzatzeach mizmor...* and yes, it can be argued that all of these words have a basic common meaning, and still they support this route through the shoresh. For could it not be that we are told here that through the action of conceding the authority to dictate law after the giving of the Torah, God's eternal authority is established? No defeat, no winner but the mutual eternal sovereignty. In the earlier verse Rav Yirmiah explains that *Lo babhamaaim hi* is a summary of this condition: Torah was given at Sinai, at that time, by allowing Jews forever to study, interpret and decide, yet also asserting *Aharei rabim lehatot* it will be the majority that will decide *halakhah* in the future. The one, unique event made that concession of power an eternal gain of strength. God is saying with joy to Eliyahu: My sons have made me eternal.

One other issue that touches on the phrase is the idea that the nature-defying spectacles which Rabbi Eliezer conjures up to prove his opinion are not a manifestation of his own magical power. Without God fueling their miracles, their magic tricks or their thunder and lightning on demand, no prophet, no wizard, no miracle maker is what he seems to be to the ordinary eye. If the majority party does not sway after witnessing the reverse flow of water, the uprooted tree or the near tumbling of the walls, the one that stood alone in the minority may have proven there is one more vote with him, but still they are the minority and *Aharei rabim lehatot*.

Finally, wander further, discarding vowels, punctuation and the placement of emphasis in the sentence, and a game can be played with a few varied building blocks: Bet, Nun, Yod can be *banai* as we've used it so far but with different vowels it can become the singular-*b'ni*. Who would be addressed as *b'ni* "my son"? It could be Eliyahu, it could be Rabbi Eliezer, and it could be the reader every time anew. And each of them could be the one

who is spoken to directly or the one who is called to be a link in the passing of the story.  
With these building blocks interchanging spaces we can construct a few scenarios:

*Nitzhuni b'ni, Nitzhuni banai.*- They have defeated me, my son, they (my sons) have defeated me.

Or:

*Nitzhuni banai, netzahuni! Banai!*- They (my sons) have defeated me, made me eternal!  
My sons!

Or:

*Nitzhuni... banai! nitzhuni, b'ni.*- They defeated me, (who?) my (own) sons! They defeated me, my son.

Take these blocks, find more possibilities and in your mind's eye add the smile. Is it a pensive chuckle? Is it a bitter grin or is it a great laugh of satisfaction and pride? *Lo bashamayim hi.*