



# Letting Go of Power

*We've all heard of leaders rising to power. But stepping down from it? That's not a headline you see every day.*

## Who Would Give Up the Chair?

On occasion, you hear about people getting fired from their positions, but it's more rare to hear about people voluntarily resigning their positions. In all of Jewish history, especially in recent centuries, it's hard to name even one rabbi or leader who stepped down from their position willingly.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya was president of the Sanhedrin during the time of the *Zugos*. He once fled to Egypt, and was later asked to return to Jerusalem to lead the Jewish people. At the end of Tractate Menachos (109b), the Gemara quotes Rabbi Yehoshua as saying: "At first, anyone who told me to rise [to leadership], I would tie him up and throw him to the lions. But now, if someone tells me to step down, I'd pour boiling water on him!"

Rashi explains that in the beginning, he hated the idea of leading. If someone even suggested it, he was ready to attack them. But once he was in the role? Suddenly it was hard to give up. Giving up the "chair" of leadership is an incredibly difficult test—and most people don't pass it.

## Hillel and the Selfless Resignation

And yet, there are exceptions.

Hillel the Elder is a name every Jew knows. Hillel was born in Babylonia, which is why he's known as "Hillel HaBavli." At age forty, he made Aliyah to Eretz Yisrael. But back then, the locals weren't exactly welcoming to Babylonians—they looked down on them.

The Gemara (Pesachim 66a) tells of a year when Erev Pesach fell on Shabbos. At the time of the Temple, the Korban Pesach was

slaughtered on Erev Pesach and eaten at the Seder. But what happens when Erev Pesach is Shabbos? Can you still bring the sacrifice? The sages didn't know.

A Korban Tzibur; communal sacrifice overrides Shabbat and was offered every day even Shabbat, but individual offerings (Korban Yachid) were forbidden on Shabbat. The dilemma was whether the Passover offering was considered a communal or a personal sacrifice?

They were in a bind.

They said, "Isn't there a man who came from Babylonia—Hillel—who studied under Shemaya and Avtalyon? He'll know." They called him in and asked, "Do you know if the Pesach offering overrides Shabbos?"

Hillel answered, "Is there only one offering a year that pushes off Shabbos? Don't we bring dozens of offerings on Shabbos every week?" (He was telling them that this is considered a communal offering.)

But even after all that, they still didn't accept Hillel's opinion. The Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 6:1; 33a) tells us that Hillel went on to bring numerous proofs to back up his position. Still, they weren't convinced—until he finally said, "This is something I heard directly from Shemaya and Avtalyon."

In other words, only when Hillel explicitly said he had received this as a *mesorah*, a tradition from his teachers, did they accept his words.

The leaders at the time were the Bnei Beseira—a respected family in Jerusalem. When they saw that Hillel had superior knowledge, they did something extraordinary: they resigned. They gave up their leadership and appointed Hillel as *Nasi*.

Hillel took the lead and began teaching the laws of Pesach that entire day. But then, he reprimanded them: "What caused me, a Babylonian, to become your leader? Your laziness—you didn't properly serve Shemaya and Avtalyon." In other words, had they learned more diligently from their teachers, they would have known the halacha themselves.

## **But Pride Can Still Creep In**

Right after that, someone asked Hillel a halachic question: "What happens if someone forgot to bring a knife for the korban and it's already Shabbos?" Hillel replied, "I actually learned that halacha... and

forgot it.”

The Talmud (Pesachim 66a) uses this to teach an important lesson: Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, “Anyone who becomes arrogant—if he is wise, his wisdom will leave him.” Why was this said? Because Hillel had just scolded the Bnei Beseira, and immediately afterward, he forgot the halacha.

The leadership then remained in Hillel’s family for 15 generations—an incredible feat in Jewish history.

One of the last leaders descended from Hillel was Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, known simply as “Rebbi”, and he was the leader of the Jews in the land of Israel after the destruction of the second Temple. The Jerusalem Talmud (Kila’im 9:2) tells us that Rebbi was extremely humble. He once said, “I’ll do anything anyone asks of me—except for what the elders of the Bnei Beseira did when they stepped down from leadership and appointed Hillel in their place.”

In other words, he was willing to accommodate anyone—but not by giving up his position.

Rebbi was only willing to give up his seat for one person—the *Rosh HaGolah*, the leader of the Jewish people in Babylon. If Rav Huna were to come to the Land of Israel, Rebbi would step down and let him take the lead. Why? “Because he is from the tribe of Yehudah, and I am from Binyamin. He is from the male line, and I am from the female.”

Ideally, the leaders of the Jewish people should come from the tribe of Yehudah. And while Rebbi was also a descendant of King David, his lineage came through the women of the family, whereas Rav Huna’s came through the men. That, he said, made Rav Huna more fitting to lead.

The Gemara continues with a fascinating story: One day, Rabbi Chiyya the Great came to Rebbi and said, “Rav Huna is outside.” Immediately, Rebbi’s face changed color. He turned pale.

Rabbi Chiyya tried to calm him; “It is his coffin,” he explained. Rav Huna wasn’t coming to usurp his position.

Rabbi Yehudah told Rabbi Chiyya, “Go out and see who’s calling for you.” Rabbi Chiyya stepped outside—but there was no one there. He realized Rabbi Yehudah was displeased with him, and he avoided entering his presence for thirty days.

## Passing the Torch: From the Baal Shem Tov to the Maggid

There's a similar story in Chassidic history. After the passing of the Baal Shem Tov, his son, Rabbi Tzvi, took over leadership of the Chassidic movement. But within a year, it became clear that he didn't have the physical strength or the kind of fire needed to lead the movement in such a turbulent time.

On the second day of Shavuot, during the Baal Shem Tov's first *yahrzeit*, Rabbi Tzvi was sitting at the head of the table, dressed in his father's holy garments. The senior disciples sat around him. After he finished teaching Torah, he suddenly stood up and said:

"Today, my holy father appeared to me and told me the following."

'The heavenly entourage that used to accompany me has now moved to Rabbi DovBer of Mezritch. Therefore, pass him over the leadership. He will sit in your place, and you will sit in his. And know that both of you will succeed, and that the Maggid received double my spirit.'

And with that, Baal Shem Tov's son turned to Rabbi DovBer and wished him *mazal tov*. He removed his outer garment, handed it to Rabbi DovBer, put on Rabbi DovBer's robe, and sat in his seat. Rabbi DovBer took the head of the table, and the disciples all stood up to hear Torah from their new Rebbe.

The Rebbe Rashab once said: "It takes immense strength to do something like that. We've seen many cases in the Talmud where people didn't want to rise to leadership—but once they were there, they refused to come down."

### What Do We Learn From This?

No one is asking you to give up your title or your seat at the table. But when a matter of public importance is at stake, personal comfort shouldn't be the first concern—*the community's needs should come first*.