

“Is not my own sorrow enough for me...?”
The Five Disciples Seek to Console Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai

When Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai's son died, five disciples came to console him.

First came Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who sat before him and said: “My master! Is it your will that I say a word in your presence?”

Johanan said, “Speak.”

Thereupon Eliezer said: “Adam had a son who died, yet he allowed himself to be comforted in his loss, since we read that he ‘knew’ his wife subsequently and begat children (*Genesis 4:25*).”

Johanan responded: “Is not my own sorrow enough for me, that you have to make mention of Adam's!?”

Then Joshua ben Hananiah drew forward, using a similar argument to that of Eliezer, referring to *Job 4:21*; he met with the same rejoinder.

Then came the third disciple, Yossi haKohen, who drew a similar parallel to Aaron the Kohen Gadol/High Priest (*Leviticus 10:3*) in which Aaron's silence, which is highlighted there, implies acquiescence and comfort.

Johanan bade Yossi desist, as he had bidden his colleagues.

Then came Rabbi Shimon ben Nathaniel, who cited the case of King David (*II Samuel 12:24*) using the same analogy as before, and eliciting the same rebuff.

Finally, the fifth disciple, Elazar ben Arak, entered. When Rabbi Johanan saw him, he called his attendant to take his clothes to the bathroom, for, he said, “Elazar is a great man, and I cannot appear before him as I am.” (e.g., in mourners clothes, without shoes, etc.) Elazar came in and sat before him.

“Let me tell you a parable,” he said to Johanan. “A king gave a man an object in trust. Day by day the man wept and cried out, ‘Woe is me! When can I be free from the responsibility of this trust?’ You, too, my Master, had a son, a scholar of Torah, learned in the Five Books of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Writings, as well as in Mishnah, Halakhah, and Aggadot. He has departed sinless from this world. You should receive comfort for having restored your trust whole.”

Johanan replied: “You have comforted me as far as any man can.”

-- *Avot deRabbi Natan, Chapter 14, 29b*

Note: *Avot deRabbi Natan* is a Tannaitic amplification of *Avot*, compiled by Rabbi Natan, an older contemporary of Rabbi Judah HaNassi, the editor of the Mishnah, ca. 2nd century CE