

Abbaye's Family Origins – A Study in Rabbinic Genealogy

(2/17/2011)

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שֵׁשׁ אֲנָכִי עַל-אִמְרֹתָיָךְ כְּמוֹצֵא שְׁלָל רָב (תהלי' קיט, 162)

Abbaye is one of the most prominent of the Babylonian Amora'im.¹ He and his colleague Rava (R. Abba b. Joseph b. Hama, Erubin 54a) of Mehoza were instrumental in shaping the Talmud Bavli. Their discussions are summarized in the phrase: *havayot diAbbaye va-Rava* (Sukkah 28a).

For those of us interested in genealogy and family history, Abbaye's family is of particular interest for there are biographical details about them scattered throughout rabbinic literature. His father's name was כִּיִּילִי, with the possible meaning "small crown" or "wholeness".² He died young while his wife was pregnant. Abbaye's mother passed away in childbirth (Zebahim 118b; Kidd 31b). Abbaye was raised by his paternal uncle and mentor Rabbah who was the Rosh Yeshivah of Pumbeditha, and by a wise foster-mother whom he called 'Em and whom he often quotes with much respect (Ber 33b; esp. Shabb 134a, etc). His real name was Nahmani named for his grandfather and was given the nickname Abbaye, probably meaning something like 'My (little) father', by his uncle in order not to disrespectfully invoke the name of the senior namesake. While the name is borne by other Babylonian scholars, in this case, the name was explained in a late midrashic acronym based on Hosea 14, 4: אֲשֶׁר בְּךָ יְרוּחָם יְתוּם.³

Abbaye was married at least twice; his second marriage was to the beautiful Homa – who was probably much younger – for she was the great granddaughter of his mentor Rav

¹ For a summary of his life and works see A. Haiman, Toldot Tannaim veAmoraim (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 74-87 (Hebrew); M. Margoliot, Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature vol 1 (Tel Aviv, 1960), cols 33-37 (Hebrew); E.E. Urbach, "Abbaye", Encyclopedia Judaica vol 1 cols. 44-45.

² See the early Second temple name כִּלִּל (Ez 10: 30 and LXX: Χαλιλλ).

³ See S. Lieberman, Mehkarim betorat Eretz-Yisrael (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 558. (Hebrew)

Yosef. Even so, this was her third marriage (Yebamot 64b; Ketubot 65a). He had children from his first marriage (Berakhot 56a; Nedarim 23a). The best known was Rav Bebai.⁴

It is noteworthy that Abbaye was very receptive of *Torat Eretz-Israel* as these traditions were conveyed to Babylon by emissaries like Rav Dimi and Rabin (*Nehoutei dema`arava*). The comparison that “One of them (from Eretz-Israel) is equal to two of us” is also attributed to Abbaye⁵ (TB Ketubot 75a). He deferred to the western tradition in halakhic matters and in customs (Pesahim 51a). It is interesting, that he permitted the speaking of Hebrew even for secular conversation (Shab 40b). Even from afar, he displays knowledge and interest in Israel’s geography⁶ as seen from his determining that the Spring of Eitam was 23 *amot* higher than its destination in Jerusalem (Yoma 31a), a number close to the present day difference of 30 meters in altitude of the lower aqueduct beginning at the Pools of Solomon (Tel `Eitam 765 meters) and ending on the Temple Mount (735 meters).⁷ This pronounced tendency in Abbaye’s teachings seems to have been bolstered by identification with the Palestinian tradition.

In this light, it is of interest to note that Abbaye’s uncle and mentor Rabbah was influenced by Rabbi Yohanan and may even have spent some time in the latter’s *yeshivah* in Tiberias (Nedarim 59a). From Ketubot 111a we see that Rabbah’s brothers indeed lived in Eretz-Israel, probably in Tiberias where they were shoemakers in the local market place (Pesahim 113b). They tried to encourage him to join them and make *`aliyah* (see Rashi). Who were these brothers? It seems reasonable to identify them with Rabbi

⁴ Haiman, *Toldot*, pp. 265-266. A name found among the Returnees to Zion, Ezra 2:11; 8:11; 10:28; Neh 10:16, see T. Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* pt 1 (Tubingen, 2002), p.80.

⁵ To which Rava countered “But when one of us goes there, he equals two of them!”

⁶ See his contra argument, based on the biblical text to the suggestion that the Shiloh tabernacle was located in the territory of Benjamin and not in that of Joseph, Zebahim 118b.

⁷ See A. Mazar, “A Survey of the Aqueducts Leading to Jerusalem” in D. Amit, Y. Hirschfeld and J. Patrich eds. *The Aqueducts of Ancient Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 169-195; esp. pp 174f (Hebrew).

Hanina and Rabbi (H)Oshaia the sons of Nahmani, the disciples of Rabbi Yohanan (Sanhedrin 14a).⁸

A recurrent theme that binds the members of this family is their priestly lineage descended from the line of Ithamar, particularly that of the family of Eli (Rosh Hashanah 18a).⁹ This tradition was associated with the unfortunate fact that many male family members were short lived. At least two or three of Abbaye's closest male relatives died young: his father Kaylel, his uncle Rabbah who, according to one tradition, died at the age of forty, and probably his grandfather Nahmani as well, though it does not seem to be the case for Abbaye who lived to the age of sixty.¹⁰ This genetic characteristic of a short life span was attributed to the curse on the House of Eli and their descendants (I Sam 2, 31-33).¹¹

⁸Haiman, Toldot, p. 116; See S.Y. Friedman, "The Spelling of the Names Rabbah and Rava in the Babylonian Talmud", Sinai 110 (1992), pp 156-158 (Hebrew). I thank Prof Friedman for sharing his erudition and illuminating the Talmudic and later sources.

⁹ Immediate descendants of the Eliides were the priesthood at Nob (I Sam 21-22); including David's fellow traveler Ebiathar, the son of Ahimelech. This branch of the family took up residence in Anatot (I Kings 2:26-27). More than likely, the prophet Jeremiah from among the priests of Anathoth and his family were descendants of Ithamar as well. Note Jeremiah's lament over Shiloh (Jer 7:12; also 26:6 ff; 41:5), which he probably visited early in his career on a mission to the remnant of the Northern tribes (3:11ff). In Ezra's time there were also members of the priesthood who could say they were descendants of Ithamar as distinguished from the line of Eleazar/Pinhas. (Ez 8:2).

¹⁰

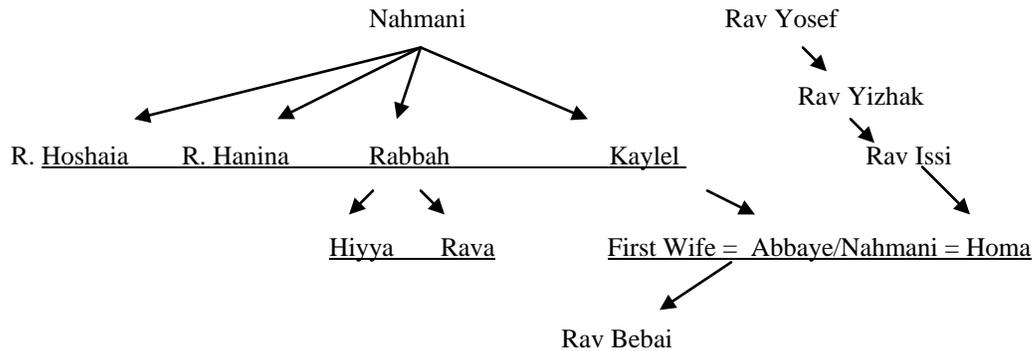
רבה ואביו מדבית עלי קאתו, רבה דעסק בתורה חיה ארבעין שנין, אביו דעסק בתורה ובגמילות חסדים - חיה שיתין שנין. (ר"ה יח ע"א).

Translation: Rabbah and Abbaye stemmed from the House of Eli.

Rabbah who studied Torah lived to the age of forty; Abbaye studied Torah and did good deeds lived to sixty (Rosh Hashanah 18a).

¹¹ There were other Amora'im of the priestly class who also had traditions that they were descendants of the family of Eli, to wit one of the several Amora'im called Rav Kahana, TP Rosh Hashanah 2:7 ,58b; TP Sanhedrin 1:2, 18c.

Taking all of these sources together, we can draw a tree of this illustrious family:



In light of this family tradition I would like to expand upon a difficult and seemingly pejorative phrase used by Rav Papi and by Rav Huna son of R Yehoshua when referring to the opinions of their esteemed colleague Rav Bebai, the son of Abbaye:

משום דאתיתו ממולאי, אמריתו מילי מוליתא?
 (עירובין כה ע"ב; יבמות עה ע"ב-עו ע"א; כתובות פה ע"א; ב"מ קט ע"א; ב"ב קלז ע"ב, קנא ע"א)

Rashi in Ketubot makes two suggestions regarding the meaning of the word ממולאי: one, מולים a reference to they're being "cut off" as the short-lived descendants of Eli; the second explanation the word as an Aramaic translation of גבנון, i.e., 'blemished' by the fact that they are genetically short-lived. In both cases the term refers to their lineage. Again in his commentary in TB Yebamot 76a, Rashi explains the word ממולאי from ממשפחה אומללה.¹² In the light of Rashi's approach we could translate this statement: "Since you come from an unfortunate family, so your words are impaired". It should be noted that this well honed statement plays on the assonance of three words , מילי, ממולאי, מולים

¹² M. Jastrow, Dictionary (New York, 1950) vol 2, p. 794: frail, short-lived frail words untenable argument "because you are frail you speak frail words". But see M. Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Baltimore/ Ramat-Gan, 2002), p. 647, who conjectures that ממולאי is derived from מעולי < ממולאה i.e. "excellent", "important" so that we read: "because you are from high places you say excellent matters".

מוליתא , while maintaining the balance between the three word strophe in each half, which is further strengthened by the two rhyming verbs אמריתו , אתיתו.

However, the Tosefot (Yebamot 76a) interprets this term as the toponym Mamla', a town in the Galilee.¹³ R. Samuel ben Meir (RASHBAM) spells it out clearly from a linguistic as well as from a literary point of view in his commentary to Baba Batra 137b:¹⁴

מולאי - כדאמר בר"ה (דף יח ע"ש) רבה (!) ואביי מדבית עלי קאתו ועל שם מקומן נקראו בני עלי ממולאי כדאמר בבראשית רבה בתחלת פרשה נ"ט¹⁵ ואברהם זקן עטרת תפארת שיבה וגו' ר"מ אזל לממלא ראה אותם שחורי ראש אמר להם שמא ממשפחת עלי אתם דכתיב ביה וכל מרבית ביתך ימותו אנשים אמרו רבי התפלל עלינו אמר להם לכו וטיפלו לצדקה ואתם זוכין לזקנה כו' וה"נ אמר בר"ה (שם דף י"ח) אם יתכפר עון בית עלי בזבח ומנחה בזבח ומנחה הוא דאין מתכפר אבל מתכפר בתורה ובגמ"ח. אמריתו מילי מוליא - דברים כרותים שאין בהם ממש לשון ימל קצירו (איוב יח) א"נ כגון מוליא במוליא בחזקת הבתים (לעיל/כבא בתרא/דף נד) גבשושיות כלומר דברים בעלי מומין, ועל שם מקומם מגדפם כדכתיב בתי אכזיב לאכזב ועקרון תעקר.

Translation: Mulai – as it is said in RH 18a: Rabbah and Abbaye were from the House of Eli, and were called after their hometown Mamlai as it is said in Berishit Rabbah at the beginning of paragraph 59: “And Abraham grew old and reached old age ,etc”; Rabbi Meir went to the town of Mamla and saw they all had black hair, and said to them ‘Perhaps you are of the House of Eli about whom it is written-“all the increase of your house shall die as (mortal) men”(I Sam 2:33)? They said ‘Rabbi pray for us ‘. He said to them ‘Go and do charity and you will merit long life’. And this is also said the House of Eli will not be cleansed with meal offerings and animal sacrifices, but rather will be cleansed by studying Torah and doing deeds of kindness.

You said words of muliata: that is words have withered as it is said Job 18:16 “his branches withered”; or the meaning of having a defect, that is defective words; they were chided playing of the name of their home town.

¹³ This possibility is mentioned in passing by Jastow. See S. Klein, Sefer Hayishub (Jerusalem, 1939 [1978]), p. 105, who notes the form ממלא in the beraita of the priestly courses and in the midrashic references to R. Yosi Mamla'aya. He identifies the site in the Lower Galilee Kh Mamelia, northwest of Migdal on the Kinneret. However, Klein did not make the association with the above statement about R. Bebai's ancestry.

¹⁴ Actually if we want to be more precise the text should have read ממולאי that is with three *mems* (!), and the *waw* between the *lamed* and *yod*. See the spelling in the Shittah Mekubbetzet below. However in cases like these the preposition probably assimilated to the same letter in the root. For a biblical example see Zech 8:14, A. Demsky, “The Temple Steward Josiah ben Zephaniah”, IEJ 31 (1981), p.102.

¹⁵ Theodore-Albeck, Bereschit Rabba (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 630-631. Cf. Mahzor Vitri 296 for a variant tradition.

In the commentaries of the Rishonim, this illuminating connection between the words of the Babylonian Amora'im and a Galilean toponym is attributed to Rabeinu Hananel. See the Arukh מלמל¹⁶; Shi'ur Mekommetz, Baba Metzia 109a; and the Tosephot HaRosh, Baba Metzia 109a: Rabeinu Hananel taught that they came from Mamlai and he called them after their hometown. (רבנו חננאל גריס דאתון ממלואי ועל שם מקומם הוא קורא אותם.)

This observation opens up a door for the genealogist as for the historian. If we go one step further, and look at the Twenty-four Priestly Courses in the traditions found in the *piyutim* of Rabbi Pinhas HaKohen and Rabbi Eleazar HaKallir, enhanced by the epigraphic evidence of synagogue inscriptions one of which is from Caesarea,¹⁷ we see that the priestly family of Hezir¹⁸ lived in the town of ממל(י), i.e. H□. Mimlaī/Kh. Mamelia (1917/2514), 130 m above sea level. The barren hill top has a clear view of the northern part of the Kinneret to the east. In the Galilean dialect, the *ūet* was pronounced like an *alef* giving the form ממל(י)א which in the Babylonian tradition became ממלואי.¹⁹ We know some things about that family prior to the destruction of the Temple. They probably lived in or around Jerusalem²⁰ for the family's burial monument having strong Hellenistic influence in design was located in the Kidron valley near

¹⁶ Arukh Hashalem ed A. Kohut (1878-1892), p 164 but see also p. 142 מל .

¹⁷ S. Klein, Sefer Hayishuv, pp. 162- 165; idem. The Land of the Galilee (2nd ed Jerusalem, 1967), p.63; T. Kahane, "The Priests according to their Courses and the Towns of Settlement", reprinted in J. Naveh (Ed) Liqqutei Tarbiz 2 (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 296-316 (Hebrew). For an early literary fragment, see TP Ta'anit 4:6; 68d.. J. Naveh, On Stone and Mosaic - The Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues (Jerusalem 1978), pp. 87-89,91,142f. Note that the badly fragmented Caesarea inscription preserves the partial name of Mamlāī.

¹⁸ See S. E. Loewenstamm who suggested that the name may be related to the Ugaritic tern *bn. ūnẓr* a kind of artisan and not related to the impure animal, Encyc. Biblica 3, cols. 94-94 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ On the Galilean pronunciation of the gutturals particularly in regard to this place name, see E.Y. Kutscher, Studies in Galilean Aramaic (Ramat Gan, 1976 tr. M. Sokoloff), pp. 87-89.

²⁰ Note the similar story of the anonymous Jerusalemite family who also suffered from short life span who came before R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, Rosh Hashanah 18a.

the Tomb of Zechariah and Yad Avshalom.²¹ The Hebrew inscription records the names of some ten members of the family.²²

Is there evidence that the Benei Hezir were descendants of Ithamar/Eli? Perhaps we can deduce their origin from the list of the twenty-four families in I Chron 24:15-9 (see also Neh 10:21 for one of the signers of the Amanah in the time of Nehemiah), where we read that sixteen families were of the line of Eleazar and eight were of the line of Ithamar.²³

While the text does not identify them specifically nor does it say that there is an appointed sequence, it is noteworthy that the family of Hezir is number seventeen which might point to the possibility that the biblical list was arranged so that the last eight families were of the branch of Ithamar.²⁴ In any case, if indeed Abbaye's family stems from Mamla'û in the Galilee, then he was probably a descendant of the priestly Benei Hezir clan who lived in Jerusalem prior to 70 CE.

In tracing the family origins of Abbaye, we have traveled from Pumbeditha in Babylon to Mamla'û in the Galilee and then back to Jerusalem. It is not only amazing that Abbaye's family kept their tradition and oral history, and perhaps continued to live in the area, but

²¹ L.I.Levine, "Second Temple Jerusalem: A Jewish City in the Greco-Roman Orbit" in L.I.Levine (ed. Jerusalem- Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam (New York, 1999), p.53-68, esp. p. 58; D. Barag, "The 2000-2001 Exploration of the Tombs of Benei Hezir and Zechariah", IEJ 53/1 (2003), pp. 78-95.

²² Ibid, pp. 92-95, 99.

²³ See Y. Liver, Chapters in the History of the Priests and Levites (Jerusalem, 1968), pp. 33- 52 (Hebrew).

²⁴ However playing on the name Benei Hezir, Zeira in the name of Rav Huna says חזר המחזור לאלעזר thereby suggesting that the first eight priestly families stem from Eleazar followed by the next eight from Ithamar and the last eight are from Eleazar (PT Ta'anit 4:2, 68a).

also others like Rav Papi and Rav Huna son of Yehoshua were want to remind them of their Galilean origins.

Postscript: In these days of testing the DNA of Kohanic and Levitic families²⁵, perhaps one could trace that of this branch of the sons of Aaron. It is noteworthy that the Tawil family of Aleppo and Egypt, in explaining their surname, claim to be descendants of Eli, an oral tradition remembered when receiving a congregational blessing (*misheberakh*) after reading the Torah greeted by their fellow congregants with the Arabic blessing < *awil `amrak* - “May your life be long”.²⁶

²⁵ For a handy introduction to the study of Jewish DNA analysis, see .D Behar and K. Skorecki, “Jewish Genetic Ancestry”, Encyclopedia Judaica (sec edit), vol 7 pp. 450-458, and esp. pp. 453- 455.

²⁶ I thank Rabbi Refael Tawil of Alon Shvut for this information.