

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

RABBI ELIEZER'S DEATH, PART II

Rabbi Akiba said in Rabbi Yehoshua's name: of two who gather cucumbers [by magic] one may be punished and the other exempt. He who really gathers them is punished while he who produces an illusion is exempt. (M. Sanhedrin 7:11, 67a)

But did Rabbi Akiba learn this From Rabbi Yehoshua? For surely it has been taught: When Rabbi Eliezer fell sick, Rabbi Akiba and his companions went to visit him. He was seated in his canopied four-poster while they sat in his salon. The sages, seeing that his mind was clear entered his chamber and sat down at a distance of four cubits. Said he to them: Why have you come? They said: To study Torah. He said: And why did you not come before now? They said: We had no time. He said: I will be surprised if [any of] these [men] die a natural death. Rabbi Akiba said to him: And what will my death be? He said: Yours will be crueler than theirs.

He then put his two arms over his heart and bewailed them saying: Woe to you, two arms of mine that have been like two Scrolls of the Law that are wrapped up. Much Torah have I studied and much have I taught. Much Torah have I learned, yet have I but skimmed from the knowledge of my teachers as much as a dog lapping from the sea. Much Torah have I taught yet my disciples have only drawn from me as much as a painting stick from its tube. Moreover, I have studied three hundred laws on the subject of a deep bright spot, yet no man has ever asked me about them.

Moreover, I have studied three hundred (or other state, three thousand laws) about the planting of cucumbers [by magic] and no man, excepting Akiba ben Joseph, ever questioned me about them. For it once happened that he and I were walking together on a road when he said to me: My master, teach me about the planting of cucumbers. I made one statement and the whole field was filled with cucumbers. Then he said: Master, you have taught me how to plant them, now teach me how to pluck them up. I said something and all the cucumbers were gathered in one place.

His visitors then asked him, "What is the law of a ball, a shoemaker's last, an amulet, a leather bag containing pearls and a small weight? He said: They can become unclean and if unclean, they are restored to their uncleanness just as they are. Then they asked him: What of a shoe that is on the last? He said: It is clean and in pronouncing this word his soul departed. Rabbi Yehoshua arose and exclaimed, "The vow is annulled. The vow is annulled." (B. Sanhedrin 68a)

This version of Rabbi Eliezer's death seems to be told a bit more from his perspective. It is brought as a commentary to the mishnah first cited. There, it says that Rabbi Akiba learned how to do magic things with cucumbers Rabbi Yehoshua. Now, this is strange because Rabbi Yehoshua is known for many things, but not for knowing magic. It may seem strange that a great sage would know how to perform magic. However, if done with the intent to glorify the one and only God and not to impress as a trick or to move one to worship an idol, then it was allowed.

Finally, his visitors asked him questions about purities and impurities. This is somewhat ironic in that Rabbi Eliezer was discharged from the Academy because of a ruling on an issue of purity. The specifics of their questions need not concern us here but what is important is that he dies with the word "pure" on his lips; a good omen to those on earth that he was accepted in the world above. It is also the opinion that he held that caused the whole fight in the first place. At that point, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eliezer's main opponent in the Academy, finally annulled the vow that had excommunicated Rabbi Eliezer.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think the role of magic is in Judaism today? Many people were interested in the "Bible Codes" and would like their prayers granted exactly as phrased. Is there still a place for magic in Judaism?
2. It is clear that the ban has been a true torture to Rabbi Eliezer and that he is frustrated and bitter over his excommunication. How would might the Jewish people have been different if Rabbi Eliezer had been able to stay in the Academy? When can a wrong done to you be unforgivable and unforgiven?
3. What is it like to be left out of a group? Has it ever happened to you? Does it give you new empathy into Rabbi Eliezer's character?