

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 8, 1999 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Study Materials 8 April, 1999

Dear Friends,

I want us to begin on a new track, now that we have finished our journey through the seven levels of heaven. I want us to follow the career of Rabbi Akiba through accounts of his life in rabbinic literature. I want to do this for several reasons.

1. He is one of the central characters in rabbinic literature and to know him is to know mishnah and midrash.
2. His story is a riveting one involving politics, romance and martyrdom.
3. The way in which we will study will give you theoretical background on how rabbinic literature is put together. All of the stories of Rabbi Akiba could have been put in one neat place in the Talmud but they were purposefully scattered about. By understanding why different stories were placed as they were we learn more about the stories and much more about the minds of those who composed the Talmud.
4. I am producing a musical on Rabbi Akiba. It will be a book of study materials and then the actual play and songs themselves. It is designed for JCCs and day schools and religious schools to use. Thus, these study materials will reflect my current interest in this topic.

We'll study the Following Topics:

His Background

His Vows and Dedication to his wife and to the Academy

The Crown of Gold

His Teachings

His Attitudes Toward Children

His Relationships with the Great Teachers of the Day

Rabban Gamliel

Rabbi Eliezer

Nachum Ish Gamzo

The Pardes

His Suffering

Thank you for being part of this study journey. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I have in preparing for it.

Cordially,

Judy Abrams

Our first text comes from the a midrash on the very last part of the Torah: the account of Moses' death. It is stated that Moses was 120 years old when he died. He is compared, then, to three other leaders who lived to this age.

"And Moses was a hundred and twenty years old [when he died]. (Deuteronomy 34:7)" This was one of four [leaders] who died at the age of 120. And these were they: Moses and Hillel the Elder and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba.

Moses was in Egypt for forty years and in Midian for forty years and sustained Israel for forty years. Hillel the Elder came up from Babylonia when was forty years old, served the sages for forty years and sustained Israel for forty years. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was a businessman for forty years, served the sages for forty years, and sustained Israel for forty years. Rabbi Akiba studied Torah when he was forty, served the sages for forty years and sustained Israel for forty years. (Sifre D 357//B. Rosh Hashanah 31b // B. Sanhedrin 41a)

Hillel the Elder and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai were great leaders of the rabbinic era and each founded movements of their own. Hillel founded the great Beit Hillel whose word was accepted as law. Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, "the house of Hillel" and "the house of Shammai" existed from the end of the first century B.C.E. until the beginning of the second century C.E. In general, Beit Hillel was more lenient than its rival, Beit Shammai, but this is an oversimplification. One may safely say that Beit Shammai tended to interpret the Torah in a more literal, narrow way, whereas Beit Hillel tended to adopt a broader perspective on it.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was the leader who founded the Academy at Yavneh, salvaging something of Jewish life from the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (see B. Gittin 56a-b). And Rabbi Akiba founded the basis for all of rabbinic literature as we know it, particularly the organization of material found in the Mishnah's system.

What is perhaps most heartening about the four lives compared here is that each one started late in life, wasn't afraid to learn as an adult and then went on to achieve greatness in his later years. Note that Rabbi Akiba learned and served at the same time. His first forty years were spent as a shepherd.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What do these four leaders have in common besides a common timeline? What distinguished each of them in their individual contributions to the Jewish people? In other words, how were these men the same and how were they different?
2. The word "sustained" in the Hebrew here is derived from the root pey-reish-nun-samech which means "to endow, provide, sustain or cultivate". A parnas (the noun form) is "a manager, administrator, leader of a community, chief". How does this root describe a good leader?