

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

How Rabbi Akiba Became Wise and Rich

Study Materials 20 May, 1999

The Texts:

This is one version of Rabbi Akiba's life story. It focuses on how he became rich. It is written in Aramaic except for a few phrases of Hebrew.

The daughter of Kalba Sevua betrothed herself to Rabbi Akiba. [When] her father heard [about this betrothal], he vowed that she was not to benefit from any of his property. She went and married him [despite her father's vow. In winter, they slept on straw and he had to pick out the straw from her hair. He said to her: If I had [enough money], I would give you a golden Jerusalem. Elijah appeared to them [looking just like any normal] person and cried out at the door: Give me some straw for my wife is giving birth and I have nothing for her to lie on. Rabbi Akiba said to his wife: See, there is a man who doesn't even have straw. [At least we have that.] She told him, "Go and [study] at a school [and become a sage]." So he went and spent twelve years [studying with] Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. At the end of these twelve years, when from the back of the house he heard a wicked man say to at wife: Your father [i.e., your husband] treated you nicely. First, he is not fitting [for you to marry, having been just a poor shepherd]. And more, he let you live like a widow all these years. She said to [the wicked man]: If he would listen to me, he would stay there twelve [more] years. Said [Rabbi Akiba]: Since she gave her permission, I will return and he went and studied twelve more years. [After this second twelve years] he returned with 24,000 pairs of students [with him]. Everyone came out to greet him, and [Rachel], too, went out to greet him. That wicked man said to her: And are you going [to see Rabbi Akiba so poorly dressed]? to welcome him, including her, too. But that wicked man said to her, "And where are you going?" She said to him: A righteous man knows the life of his beast (Proverbs 12:10). She went out to see him but the sages pushed her away. [Rabbi Akiba] said to them: Leave her alone, for what is mine and what is yours is really hers. Kalba Sevua heard [that Rabbi Akiba had arrived] and he went and sought to have his vow [against his daughter] nullified [and it was nullified].

From six things did Rabbi Akiba become rich: (1) From Kalba Sevua. (2) From a ship's ram. For every ship is has an image of an animal on it. One time [some sailors] forgot this animal figure on the sea shore and Rabbi Akiba found it [filled with money]. (3) From a hollowed out trunk. For once he gave four zuz to sailors and told them to bring him something. But they found only a hollow log on the sea shore, which they brought to him saying: Wait and sit on this. It turned out [that the log] was full of dinari. For once it happened that a ship sunk and all its treasures were placed in that log and it was found at that time. (4) from a matron (5) the wife of Turnus Rufus and (6) from Ketiva bar Shalom. (//B. Avodah Zarah 20a). (B. Nedarim 50a-b)

While we will study the six incidents in which Rabbi Akiba became rich, let us first concentrate on the story about how he became married to his wife Rachel. He went, with her permission, to become a great sage. Rachel apparently suffered great taunting at what appeared to be Rabbi Akiba's abandonment; and she did so with great dignity and clarity of purpose. She married him (as we will learn from the parallel text) because she saw that he had the potential to become a great scholar and she was willing to live a life of "widowhood" to help him accomplish that goal.

When Rabbi Akiba finally returns with 24,000 disciples in tow, he publicly acknowledges to everyone assembled that he owes everything to his wife. Kalba Savua, hearing that a great sage has come to town but not realizing that it is his son-in-law, asks that his hasty and mean-spirited vow be annulled and then gives Rabbi Akiba half his fortune.

The first three examples of how Rabbi Akiba became rich are clear. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz's commentary (in

his Hebrew edition of Nedarim and according to Soncino's commentary in the English translation of Nedarim), Rabbi Akiba borrowed a sum of money from a matron and was unable to pay it back in a timely way. She went to the sea and found a treasure that a king had thrown into the sea and assumed that this was God's way of returning the money to her. Then, when Rabbi Akiba came to return her money to her, she begged him to keep it as she accounted the loan as already repaid by God.

The incident with the wife of Turnus Rufus can be found in the following text.

Rabbi Akiba saw the wife of the wicked Turnus Rufus (Governor of Judea 1st c. C.E.). [Upon seeing her] he spat, he laughed and he cried. He spat because she came from a decaying drop. He laughed because [he knew that] in the future she would convert [to Judaism] and she would marry him [and thus attain her wealth]. [And] he cried because [knew] that her beauty would decay in the dust. (B. Avodah Zarah 20a)

This woman, after her marriage to Rabbi Akiba, gave him all her wealth. Rabbi Akiba's reaction to Turnus Rufus' wife is very similar to the advice we find in Pirkei Avot how to avoid sin:

Akavya ben Mahalaleil says: contemplate three things and you will not be susceptible to sin. Know from whence you have come and whither you are going and before whom you will have to give an account in the future. From whence did you come? From a decaying drop. Whither are you going? To a place of dust, worms and maggots. And before whom will you have to give an account [of your deeds] in the future? Before the King of Kings, the Holy one Blessed be He. (Avot 3:1)

The incident with Ketiah bar Shalom is one in which a man executed for his loyalty to the Jews bequeathed all his money to Rabbi Akiba. Ketiah bar Shalom, means, "the circumcised one, son of peace" or "through circumcision he has peace". He was probably Flavius Clemens, Domitian's nephew, who was executed for Judaising toward the end of Domitian's reign (c. 96 C.E.). Just before he was executed he had himself circumcised and was immortalized by the sages for his act of devotion (B. Avodah Zarah 10b).

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Akiba's story, in this version, is one of great luck based on God's providence. Should a virtuous life be one that is rewarded monetarily? What do you think the sages were trying to say by framing his story in this way?
2. Why do you think this story was placed with this mishnah? Where else might it have been placed in the Talmud? For example, since so much of his money comes from non-Jewish sources, might it not have been placed in tractate Avodah Zarah? How would its meaning have changed had it been placed there?