

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

The End of Rabbi Akiba's 24,000 Students

We recall the triumphal story of Rabbi Akiba returning to his hometown with 24,000 disciples in tow. Now, sadly, we find that their end was a tragic one.

First, we study the mishnah to which our story is attached:

Mishnah: A person may not abstain [from the mitzvah of] "be fruitful and multiply" unless he already has children. The House of Shammai say: [He must have] two sons [to be free of this obligation.] Beit Hillel says: a boy and a girl. (M. Yebamot 7:6)

Each man is required to fulfill the mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply". This obligation does not fall on women since we cannot obligate someone to do something that will hurt them. So, asks this mishnah, what is the minimum that counts for procreation? Beit Shammai says it must be two boys; Beit Hillel that it must be a boy and a girl. They both base their views on different prooftexts. What is important for us here is the story of Rabbi Akiba's disciples' deaths is linked to this mishnah. For having disciples in the rabbi's culture was akin to having children. So, when Rabbi Akiba's students all die, he must go forth and again pursue the mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply" by making more students.

It was said that Rabbi Akiba had twelve thousand pairs of disciples from G'vat to Antipatris [that is, from the North to the South of the Land of Israel] and all of them died at one time. [Why?] Because they did not treat each other with respect. And the world was confounded until Rabbi Akiba went to our Teachers in the South and taught Torah to them, i.e., to Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua. And they caused the Torah to arise at that time. (B. Yebamot 62b)

After the death of all of his disciples, Rabbi Akiba had to begin again. And he began with the very sages who would carry his words forward through the Mishnah, Tosefta and Midrash.

[The author of] an anonymous mishnah is Rabbi Meir; of an anonymous Tosefta, Rabbi Nehemiah; of an anonymous [passage in] Sifra [the midrash on Leviticus], Rabbi Yehudah; in the Sifre [the midrash on Deuteronomy], Rabbi Shimon, and all are taught according to the views of Rabbi Akiba. (B. Sanhedrin 86a)

Discussion Questions:

1. How is a parent like a teacher? How is a teacher like a parent?
2. How could the showing of disrespect end up in the deaths of 24,000 pairs of students?
3. How was Rabbi Akiba's teaching style changed as a result of this tragedy? Do you think it was for the better or for the worse? Why?