

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

Rabbi Akiba's Continuing Awe Before the Torah

A picture of Rabbi Akiba is emerging of a man utterly in love with the Torah. Even though he knew it as well, indeed, probably better, than most members of his congregation he refused the honor of reading from the Torah scroll because he had not properly prepared the reading:

Another interpretation, "And God spoke [the Ten Commandments] (Exodus 20:1)" This is what Scripture said, "Then he saw it and told it; he prepared it and also researched it (Job 28:27)." And afterward [it says], "And he said to man, 'Behold the fear of God is wisdom and to turn from evil is understanding.' (Job 28:28)" The Torah teaches you that if you are a person of Torah, be not proud [and] say a word [of Torah] before the public until you have practiced it by yourself two or three times.

A story is told of Rabbi Akiba that the cantor publicly called him to read from the Torah scroll before the congregation but he did not wish to rise [to the honor]. His students said to him, "Our master, did you not teach us, 'it [Torah] is your life and the length of your days'? so why did you hold back from going up [to read from the Torah]? He said to them, "[I swear by] the [Temple] service [that] I wouldn't have held back from reading except that I had not gone over the portion two or three times and a person is not permitted to say words of Torah before the public until he has practiced them two or three times to himself." For thus we find of the Holy One blessed be He, that he gives an answer in the language of human beings and the Torah was revealed before Him like a star. And when He came to give it to Israel, it is written of Him, "Then he saw it and told it; he prepared it and also researched it (Job 28:27)." And afterward [it says], "And he said to man, 'Behold the fear of God is wisdom and to turn from evil is understanding.' (Job 28:28)". And so it is written, "And God spoke all these words (Exodus 20:1) [that is] to Himself, and [only] afterward [does it say that He spoke, "saying (Exodus 20:1). (Tanchuma Yitro 15)

One of the interesting features of this passage are that it portrays even God as practicing before reciting Torah; that's how important an act it is. To participate correctly in such a holy moment as reading the Torah for the community, one must be prepared practically (i.e., be able to say the words), intellectually (i.e., be able to understand them and explain them) and spiritually (i.e., be able to receive their true message).

Discussion Questions

1. What would Torah practice be like for God? How would it differ from the mechanical practice in which we engage?
2. How could we bring more of this "God-like" practice into our training to read Torah, specifically the training of our bar and bat mitzvah students?
3. What does this say about Rabbi Akiba and his love for Torah?