

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

### Rabbi Akiba in Prayer

Rabbi Akiba never lost touch with what it was like to sit in synagogue, befuddled by the ecstasy of others. While he was, himself, a great mystic, he had the tact to realize that not everyone would or could reach his level of intensity in prayer.

Our mishnah here teaches us the minimum standard for prayer, i.e., serious-mindedness while also defining the maximum to which the pious might aspire:

One should not stand up to pray except in a serious frame of mind. The earlier righteous ones [of older generations] would pause for one hour [to develop the correct state of mind and then] pray, in order that their hearts should be [utterly] directed toward their Father in Heaven. [They would be in such a trance that if] even if a king would greet them they would not answer him, nor even if a snake wound itself around his ankle would he stop [praying]. (M. Berachot 5:1)

In commenting on this mishnah, we find that Rabbi Akiba resembles the pious men of earlier generations while pairing that piety with an understanding of those not so inclined:

Rabbi Yehudah said: This was the custom of Rabbi Akiba. When he would pray with the public he would shorten [his prayers] and arise in order not to become a burden to the congregation. But when he prayed by himself, a person would leave him [beginning] his prayer in one corner and find him in a different corner. And how was it that he moved about so much? Through [numerous] bowings and prostrations. (B. Berachot 31a)

#### Discussion Questions

1. What is the proper frame of mind for prayer? Fear? Awe? Joy? When might each be appropriate?
2. This mishnah clearly shows that prayer could induce trance-like states in those who had the discipline to develop them. Do you see here a source for Jewish meditation and, perhaps, a way to achieve it?
3. Rabbi Akiba was kind enough to keep his prayer short so that the congregation would not have to wait for him to finish his prayer. How would such an attitude inspire greater respect for prayer in those who witnessed it?