

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

RABBI AKIBA AND CHILDREN

Much of the material regarding Rabbi Akiba and children is to be found in tractate Pesachim. This is logical. The whole thrust of the seder is to educate children and bring them into the chain of tradition through the telling of the story. Rabbi Akiba's dealings with children come as commentaries to this mishnah which outlines some of the basic requirements of the seder:

On the eve of Passover close to the afternoon service, a person must not eat [the Seder meal] until it is dark. Even the poor[est] person in Israel should not eat [the Passover supper] until he reclines. And they should not give him less than four cups [of wine] and even [if he receives charity] from the charity plate. (M. Pesachim 10:1)

The minimum requirements for the Passover seder as outlined in this mishnah are that one should prepare for the seder by fasting during the preceding afternoon. And each person, no matter how poor, should recline to indicate that they are free and that each person should drink four cups of wine no matter how poor he or she is.

The afternoon preceding Pesach is an important one. Preparations for the seder reach a fever pitch. Rabbi Akiba understood this and understood how important it was for even scholarship to stop in order to facilitate the children's learning at the seder.

They said about Rabbi Akiba: All his days he would not say: The time has come to arise from the House of Study [and cease studying] except on the eve of Pesach and the eve of Yom Kippur. [He did so] on the eve of Pesach for the sake of the children, in order that they shouldn't fall asleep [during the seder]. [And he did so] on Yom Kippur in order that they should feel their children. (B. Pesachim 109a)

Rabbi Akiba knew that it would be hard for the children to stay up late to hear the entire story of the exodus. Thus, he would hurry home from the Academy to entertain them and help them stay awake.

Rabbi Akiba gave his own son the following, very practical, pieces of advice for getting along in the world:

Our Rabbis taught: Seven things did Rabbi Akiba command his son Rabbi Joshua: My son, do not sit and repeat your studies at the highest point in town. Do not live in a town whose leaders are students of sages. Do not enter your house suddenly, and all the more so [do not enter] your neighbor's house suddenly. Do not withhold shoes from your feet. Arise and eat, in summer on account of the sun and in winter on account of the cold. Treat your Sabbath like a weekday rather than be dependent on another person. And try to be with the person upon whom the hour smiles. (B. Pesachim 112a)

Rabbi Akiba urged his son not to study at the highest point in town lest people, frequently passing by, interrupt his study. He shouldn't live in a town run by scholars, since they are intent on studying and neglect the needs of the town. He should give warning when entering a house simply to be polite and to prevent those within from becoming startled. He should take care of his health by wearing shoes (protection from scorpions), rising early and eating breakfast. He shouldn't borrow money so that he could live a lavish lifestyle, even when it came to religious requirements. (One's Sabbath meal was to be more luxurious than one's weekday meals. Nonetheless, Rabbi Akiba taught that it is better to have a "weekday" style meal on Shabbat than to borrow money in order to have a fancier Shabbat dinner.) Finally, Rabbi Akiba urged his son to be on good terms with the rich persons in his town. In other words, he taught his son to look out for himself, study hard, be aware of his surroundings, take care of his health, be polite, be frugal, but don't

spurn good fortune.

We might find it odd that Rabbi Akiba, one of our most learned and pious Sages, would choose to give his son such practical wisdom as his core advice to him. And yet, he reflected an important truth: as Jewish parents we are, of course, supposed to teach our children the religious wisdom of our tradition. Yet we should also teach them how to negotiate their way in the world at large.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of Rabbi Akiba's pieces of advice to his son do you find most useful? Least useful? Why?
2. These passages give us a picture of a man not only great in wisdom but devoted to the needs of children? How do these two factors complement each other?