

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 23, 1999 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

RABBI AKIBA'S SAYINGS IN PIRKEI AVOT

Though redacted into the Mishnah, Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of the Fathers, does not truly belong in the Mishnah. It is of a later origin but stems from the same sages who contributed to the Mishnah. It is a collection of ethical and spiritual teachings. Rabbi Akiba, as we might expect, is featured prominently in this tractate. While many sages have no teachings or only one, Rabbi Akiba passed on these ideas in Pirkei Avot. We can find evidence of Pirkei Avot's later date in that he learns a lesson from another sage so well that he teaches it as his own learning in Pirkei Avot.

First we find in the midrash collection to the book of Leviticus, Sifre:

"Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)" Rabbi Akiba said: This is the greatest principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai quoted the verse: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In that day God created human beings in the likeness of God did God make him. (Genesis 5:1)" He said: This is a principle greater than that. (Sifra on Leviticus 19:18)

Ben Azzai's teaching is considered superior because if you don't love yourself properly, then you won't love your neighbor properly either. But if you always remember that you, and the person you are with, are both created in God's image then you will treat everyone with the love and respect each human being deserves. In Rabbi Akiba's teaching in Pirkei Avot, he incorporates this learning into his legacy of wisdom:

He also used to say: Beloved is man in that he was created in the image [of God]. Superabundant love that it was made known to him that he had been created in the image [of God]. As it is said: "For in the image of God made He man (Genesis 9:6)"

Beloved are Israel in that they were called children of the All-Present. [It was a mark of] superabundant love [that] it was made known to them that they were called children of the all-present as it is said: "You are children of the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 14:1)"

Beloved are Israel in that a desirable instrument [i.e., Torah] was given to them. [It was a mark of] superabundant love [that] it was made known to them that the desirable instrument, wherewith the world had been created was given to them, as it is said, "For I give you good doctrine forsake not my teaching (Proverbs 4:2)." (Pirkei Avot 3:14)

Everything is foreseen but free will is given and the world is judged with goodness and everything is in accordance with the preponderance of a [person's] deed[s]. (Pirkei Avot 3:15)

Rabbi Akiba said: Jestings and light-headedness lead a man on to lewdness; tradition is a fence to the Torah; tithes [form] a fence to wealth, vows a fence to self-restraint; a fence to wisdom is silence. (Pirkei Avot 3:13)

He [also] used to say: Everything is given against a pledge and a net is spread out over all the living. The store is open and the storekeeper allows credit but the ledger is open and the hand writes and whoever wishes to borrow may come and borrow but the collectors go round regularly every day and exact duties from man, either with his consent or without his consent and they that have that on which they [can] rely [in their claims], seeing that the judgement is a righteous judgment and everything is prepared for the banquet. (Pirkei Avot 3:16)

In these sayings, we can see the forces that shaped Rabbi Akiba's life: discipline, recognition of the frailty of life and the cruelty of fate, the ability to follow a dream and make it real, a love of Torah and of God.

Discussion Questions

1. The saying that "everything is foreseen but free will is given" is a familiar one. How does knowing what the rest of the teaching says change your understanding the former part of it?
2. What metaphor might you use to describe God's actions besides the workings of a store?
3. Rabbi Akiba is thought to be a man with a mystical bent. How do you interpret his teaching that "a fence to wisdom is silence"?