

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHY ELISHA BEN ABUYA WENT WRONG

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With this passage we begin to study in depth one of the most interesting characters in rabbinic literature: Elisha ben Abuyah. This man was the teacher of none other than Rabbi Meir, one of the greatest sages that every lived (and married to Beruriah, a woman of great intelligence). As we go along it will become clear that he was a very erudite sage but his use of that knowledge condemned him to a posterity of infamy.

The end of a thing is better than its beginning so long as it is good from its beginning. And so it happened to me [said Elisha].

My father, Abuyah, was one of the important people in Jerusalem. When the day of my circumcision came, he invited all the important people of Jerusalem and sat them down in one room, with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in another room. When they had eaten and drunk they began stamping their feet and dancing. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua: While they are occupying themselves in their way we will occupy ourselves in our way. So they sat down and engaged in the study of the Torah, from the Pentateuch to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings. And fire fell from heaven and surrounded them.

Abuyah said to them: My masters, have you come to burn my house down around me?

They said: God forbid! But we were sitting searching around in the words of the Torah from the Pentateuch to the Prophets and from the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as alive as when they were given from Mt. Sinai. And the fire shone around us as it shone from Mt. Sinai. And the essential attribute of their being handed over at Sinai? They were given only by fire.

Abuyah, my father, said to them: My masters, if this is the power of the Torah, if this son of mine lives I will dedicate this son of mine to Torah.

Because his [original] intention was not pure [i.e., for the sake of heaven], therefore it was not realized in the case of this man [Elisha, speaking of himself in the third person]. (Y. Hagigah 2:1, 77b)

Elisha is doomed from the day of his circumcision onward. His father wants him to study the Torah in order to wield its power, not so that he could develop a loving relationship with God. In essence, Elisha doesn't stand a chance because of something his father did.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the role of "miracle workers" or people who use religion to wield power in our society today? Given what we learn from this passage, how, then, would you view such persons who promise "magical" cures, curses, blessings and the like?
2. Can parents ruin things for their children before they get a fair start in life? Even if a parent damages a child in some way are there ways for the child to overcome their situation?

3. What does this passage teach us about lavish partying at Jewish events?

I look forward to reading your answers!