

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

### RABBI AKIBA AND THE SAGES: RABBAN GAMLIEL

We might expect relations between Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Academy after the Temple's fall in 70 C.E. to have been strained. After all, Rabban Gamliel was born into a life of privilege and led the Jewish people through the tumultuous times from 80 or 90-110 C.E. Seeing that Jerusalem would fall, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai had formed an academy in Yavneh to preserve the traditions of the Jewish people. After Yohanan ben Zakkai died, Rabban Gamliel became the president of the Academy. He wanted to secure Yavneh's status as the spiritual center of Judaism. To that end he exercised his authority as Nasi, the President of the Academy, so harshly that he was eventually expelled from office. He was, however, reinstated shortly thereafter.

Rabbi Akiba's relationship with Rabban Gamliel was complicated. Not only did Rabbi Akiba not come with a renowned family background but he started learning later in life. Not only that, Rabbi Akiba's greatest teacher, mentor and friend, Rabbi Eliezer, was Rabban Gamliel's enemy in the Academy. Indeed, our texts tell us that Rabbi Akiba was often reprovved by Rabban Gamliel:

It was taught: Rabbi Tarfon said, I wonder whether there is in this generation anyone who accepts reproof, for if one says to him: Remove the mote from between your eyes, he would answer: Remove the beam from between your eyes! Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said: I wonder if there is one in this generation who knows how to reprove! Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri said: I call heaven and earth to witness for myself that often was Akiba punished through me because I used to complain against him before our Rabban, Gamliel Beribbi, and all the more he showered love upon me to make true what has been said: "Reprove not a scorner lest he scorn you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:8)" (B. Arachin 16b)

Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri was a supervisor of students for Rabban Gamliel (Sifre D., 16) and so would be in position to reprove Rabbi Akiba for showing up late to study sessions. Yet, he testifies that Rabbi Akiba bore him no ill will in this regard and, indeed, showed Rabbi Yohanan how much he admired him for doing his job well.

(This passage comes right in the middle of a wonderful section on lashon hara, the rules of not sinning through speech, so if you are ever looking for a source on that topic I'd direct you to this part of the Talmud, first.)

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiba represent two quite different types of leadership styles. What could each of these men learn from the other?
2. Rabbi Akiba wanted to live up to a certain standard, described in the passage from Proverbs. What is it about being able to accept criticism that makes a person wise? Did you ever accept a criticism that benefited you? What happened?