

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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THE SEEDS OF RABBI ELIEZER'S EXCOMMUNICATION

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As we have seen in past passages (e.g., http://www.maqom.com/feb2_2000.html), Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated from the Academy after the incident concerning the Oven of Akhnai. But could so great a sage be excommunicated over such a relatively small issue? It turns out that this is merely the straw that broke the camel's back. He has apparently been interested in minut, i.e., Judeo-Christianity, before this incident occurred.

A story was told that Rabbi Eliezer was arrested on account of minut....When he left court (after having been found innocent), he was distressed to have been arrested on matters of minut.

His disciples came to comfort him, but he did not accept their words of comfort. Rabbi Akiba came and said to him: Rabbi, may I say something to you so that you will not be so distressed? He said to him: Go on. Rabbi Akiba said: Perhaps one of the minim told you something of minut which pleased you.

Rabbi Eliezer said: By heaven, you remind me. Once I was strolling in the camp of Sepphoris. I bumped into Jacob of Kefar Sikhnin, and he told me a teaching of minut in the name of Jesus ben Panitiri and it pleased me. So I was arrested on account of matters of minut. So I was arrested on account of matters of minut, for I transgressed the teachings of Torah: Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house...(Proverbs 5:8) For Rabbi Eliezer did teach: One should always flee from what is disreputable and from whatever appears to be disreputable. (T. Shechitat Hullin 2:24)

This story provides us with numerous insights into the sages' world. (1) The sages and Judeo-Christians were apparently living cheek-by-jowl and interacting with one another. (T. Hullin 2:22 (i.e., immediately preceding the story under question) tells another story of a healer using the teachings of Jesus ben Panitiri which are forbidden.) (2) Rabbi Eliezer characterizes this incident as an unfortunate slide down a slippery slope. (3) In a foreshadowing of his deathbed scene, sages tried to comfort him, but it is Rabbi Akiba who is able to bring Rabbi Eliezer comfort.

Compare this passage with the one above:

Once Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, and Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah and Rabbi Akiba came to visit him. Rabbi Tarfon said to him, "Master, you are more precious to Israel than the orb of the sun, for the orb of the sun sheds light on this world, while you have enlightened both this world and the world to come." Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, "Master you are more precious to Israel than the gift of rain, for rain grants life in this world, while you give it in the world to come." Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said to him, "Master you are more precious to Israel than one's father and mother, for father and mother bring one into this world, while you have brought us into this world and into the world to come." Rabbi Akiva said to him, "Master, precious are chastisements." Rabbi Eliezer thereupon said to his disciples, "Prop me up." When Rabbi Eliezer had sat up, he said to Akiba, "Go on, Akiba." (Sifre D., Piska 32//B.Sanhedrin 68a)

Discussion Questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from Rabbi Eliezer's interaction with teachings which are not "kosher" but which he

finds good, nonetheless?

2. Does this put Rabbi Eliezer's excommunication after the dispute over the Oven of Akhnai into context? If you were the "prosecuting attorney" how would you characterize this incident? If you were the "defending attorney" how would you characterize this incident?
3. Both here and at his deathbed, it is Rabbi Akiba who brings Rabbi Eliezer relief. Is this a literary convention or is Rabbi Akiba simply more effective at calming Rabbi Eliezer? How does Rabbi Akiba's comfort differ from that of the other sages?