

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted November 10, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

WHAT WAS IT THAT AHER (AKA ELISHA BEN ABUYA) DID THAT WAS SO BAD?

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Elisha ben Abuya is condemned so strongly in rabbinic literature that we have to ask, "What was it that he did that was so awful?"

The Talmud of the Land of Israel has a much different answer to this question than the Babylonian Talmud does. Here, it lists three things that Aher does that cause him to be cut off from the Jewish community and, by extension, what would make anyone else be kicked out of the community.

(1) Who is Aher? Elisha ben Abuyah, who slew the young scholars of the Torah. They say: He used to kill every disciple he saw mastering the Torah.

(2) Moreover, he used to enter the schoolhouse, and when he saw the pupils in the presence of the teacher he would say, "What are these doing here? This one should be a mason; this one should be a carpenter; this one should be a fisherman; this one should be a tailor." When they heard this they would leave [the teacher] and go [and become workmen]. Of him Scripture says: "Let your mouth not lead you into sin (Ecclesiastes 5:5)" For he ruined his own [good] deeds.

(3) Also at the time of the persecution they [the Romans] made [the Jews] carry burdens [on the Sabbath], and the Jews arranged it so that two people should share one load, because of the rule that two people doing one piece of work [are not liable in regard to Sabbath violation]. Elisha said, "Make them carry the loads by themselves." They went and made them carry them by themselves, but they arranged to unload in a karmelit [an area that cannot be classified either as private ground or as public ground], so that they might not bring them out from private to public ground [which is forbidden]. Elisha said, "Make them carry bottles" [which would get broken if left lying]. (Y. Hagigah 2:1, 77b)

Bearing in mind that the most important of this kind of passage is the one in the middle, we can see that Elisha ben Abuya's directing children into secular careers rather than encouraging their Torah study.

The first part of the story is somewhat difficult to believe in a literal way. Perhaps he would "slay" the knowledge they carried inside them. This is quite plausible as he was a great sage before he became "Aher."

The third part of the story is believable. If Elisha was in league with the Romans, he could well have used his expert knowledge against the Jewish community that rejected him.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is telling children to pursue "practical" jobs the greatest sin of all? There's a hint of this in the one place where Elisha ben Abuya's teaching is mentioned in a praiseworthy way: If one learns when he is young, what is that like? To ink written on new [clean] paper. If one learns when one is old, what is that like? To ink written on blotted paper. (M. Pirkei Avot 4:25) Has he, perhaps, changed his mind? Or does he want to stop the children so

they can be open to pagan influences?

2. Elisha seems to be collaborating with the Romans. He is not the first Jew (nor, sadly, probably the last) who will collaborate with an enemy of the Jews. What is the fate of other such figures in Jewish history? How are they remembered?
3. These actions of Elisha ben Abuya's remind one of Amalek, who persecuted us for no good reason and who we are not allowed to forget. What are the advantages of remembering your enemies? What are the disadvantages?

I look forward to reading your remarks!

Judy

P.S. The musical is ready to be sent out! If you are interested in a perusal copy please contact me at maqom@compassnet.com.