

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

AHER'S LEGACY

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As we have seen in our previous study passages about Elisha ben Abuya, he was knowledgeable and a great teacher of one of the greatest sages that ever lived, i.e., Rabbi Meir, Beruriah's husband. Rabbi Meir was a faithful friend and student, even after Elisha had committed himself to hurting the Jewish people. Rabbi Meir was devoted to his teacher so much that he helped him even in the afterlife.

Elisha fell sick. They came and told Rabbi Meir: Behold, your master is ill. He went, intending to visit him, and he found him ill. He said to him: Will you not repent?

He said: If sinners repent, are they accepted?

[Rabbi Meir] said: Is it not written thus: "You cause a man to repent up to the point when he becomes dust. (Psalm 90:30)"? Up to the time when life is crushed are repentant sinners received. At that point, Elisha wept, then he departed [this life] and died. And Rabbi Meir rejoiced in his heart, thinking: My master died in repentance.

When they buried him, fire came down from heaven and consumed his grave. They came and told Rabbi Meir: Behold, your master's grave has been set on fire.

He went, intending to visit it, and found it burning.

What did he do? He took his long prayer cloak and spread it over the corpse saying: "Pass the night (Ruth 3:13)". Stay in this world which is like the night. "And it shall be in the morning (Ruth 3:13)". This is the world to come which is all morning. "If he will redeem you, well and good; let him redeem you (Ruth 3:13)"--this is the Holy One, blessed be He, of whom it is written: "The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is over all that He has made (Psalm 145:9)". "And if it does not please him to redeem you, then, as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. (Ruth 3:13)" Then the fire was extinguished.

They said to Rabbi Meir: If they ask you in that world, Who do you intend to visit [first], your father or your master [what will you do]?"

He said to them: I will visit my master first, and after that, my father.

They said to him: Will they hearken to your plea [for Elisha]?

He said to them: Elisha ben Abuya will be saved through the merit of his [study of the] Torah.

Some time later, Elisha's daughters went to receive alms from Rabbi. Rabbi decreed saying: "Let there be none to extend kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children. (Psalm 109:12)"

The daughter said to him: Rabbi, do not look upon his deeds but on his Torah.

At that moment Rabbi wept and decreed that they should be provided for. He said, "If these are [the children] raised by this man who labored in the Torah for the wrong motives, how much more would be achieved by one who labors in it for the right motives [lit., for the sake of heaven]!" (Y. Hagigah 2:1, 77b-c)

Discussion Questions:

There are so many interesting things to comment upon here that it's rather like a Viennese dessert table. First of all, no matter what sort of ban has been placed on Elisha ben Abuya, it's clear that Rabbi Meir has no intention of forsaking

his friend. He never gives up hope, either that Elisha ben Abuya might repent.

1. This may seem bothersome to contemporary learners because we have been taught that if, let us say, Hitler accepted Jesus 30 seconds before he died he would be able to enter heaven while a six-year-old child killed in a gas chamber would not go to heaven. The idea that one who had done so much evil, i.e., Elisha ben Abuya, could repent just before death and merit the world to come is not one that really works in Judaism in which repentance must be accompanied by confession and restitution.

So the question is this: Are deathbed confessions efficacious? Have you ever been with a loved one who acted badly but just at the end of his/her life made confession and gave apologies? How did such actions make you feel? Did they give you peace or make you angry or...?

2. The running midrash on Ruth concerns the part of Ruth's story where she is looking for a husband who will make her a levirate wife since she had no children from her previous marriage. Rachel's destiny is to marry Boaz, even though there is another family member she might marry before him. This verse in the book of Ruth describes how she should spend the night with Boaz and that it will be made all right in the morning, as indeed, it does. It is true that those who have sinned and repented are closer to God than those who never sinned at all (B. Berachot 34a). What Rabbi Meir is doing here is acting as Boaz does to Ruth. He is trying to bring about a fitting conclusion of joy, or at least peace, through a subterfuge. Rabbi Meir casts himself as Boaz and Elisha ben Abuya as Ruth. And in the end, Rabbi Meir does redeem Elisha's suffering and the fire over the grave is extinguished.

We recall from a previous passage (http://www.maqom.com/oct22_2004.html) that the powerful fire of Torah study may have contributed to Aher's eventual fate on the very day of his brit milah. It is somehow fitting, then, that his story ends with fire. What kind of fires are they? Think of what happened to Rabbi Eliezer whose life was filled with instances of the use of fire and what eventually happened to him. Why is he treated so much better by our sources ? What is at stake here?

3. The third section concerns Elisha ben Abuya's daughters. At first Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi is tempted to turn them away. Then he realizes that once Torah study is inside a person, even if what they do with that learning turns out to be in the wrong, that learning must be honored. Can you think of times where people acquired merit for studying even if their motives for doing so were impure? What happened?