

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted February 2, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

RABBI AKIBA AND RABBI ELIEZER'S DEATH SCENE

As we know from our previous study, Rabbi Eliezer was cast out of the Academy for holding to his views so stubbornly. In this passage from the midrash on the book of Deuteronomy, Sifre, those sages who were closest to Rabbi Eliezer try to come close to him as he dies.

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)

Everything that these sages say to Rabbi Eliezer is true. Rabbi Eliezer has given eternal light, growth and life to Israel. His teachings are reported everywhere in the Mishnah. Yet it is only when Rabbi Akiba addresses what is in Rabbi Eliezer's heart that Rabbi Eliezer responds. To the compliments, Rabbi Eliezer turns a deaf ear. But to the idea that his suffering might serve some purpose, Rabbi Eliezer perks up and makes a reply.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think it was Rabbi Akiba especially who said to Rabbi Eliezer that chastisements, i.e., sufferings, are precious?
2. This is an almost perfect example of Rabbi Akiba's ability to empathise with others. We recall that when he brought the news of Rabbi Eliezer's excommunication to him, Rabbi Akiba sat in black as if in mourning himself. Here, he realizes that no compliments can soothe Rabbi Eliezer: he already knows what he has done. If suffering is, in some measure, the search for meaning; the desire to make sense of the chastisement, then how is Rabbi Akiba's statement, which may at first seem tactless, in fact the best thing to have said?