Rabbi Meir and Beruriah: What Happens When Your Friends and Relatives Aren't the Best?

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We've talked a good bit these past two weeks about those who are mentally ill and/or behave reprehensibly. But what do you do if these people are your ancestors or your close friends?

To find out, we look to one of our greatest sages: Rabbi Meir. He was descended from Nero (yes, that Nero) who, according to legend converted to Judaism (B. Gittin 56a). And he had two great teachers.

The first was Rabbi Akiba who used to be something of a thug:

> Before I became learned, I used to say: Would that I would have a scholar before me! I would bite him as does an ass. His students said: Master, you mean, as does a dog. He said: No, for when an ass bites, he breaks bones. When a dog bites, he breaks no bones.
>
> (Y. Pesachim 49b)

In the end, of course, he becomes a great and righteous teacher but there's no getting away from the fact that, in the beginning, he was a tough, illiterate character.

Then there's Rabbi Meir's other great teacher: Elisha ben Abuya. He utterly forsakes Judaism but Rabbi Meir keeps learning with him anyway…and keeps urging him to repent.

That's not all! Rabbi Meir's wife, Beruriah, is the daughter of a great sage, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradiyon. But her brother is an incorrigible thief.

So here we have two of our greatest sages: Rabbi Meir and Beruriah, both of whom have relatives—and teachers—who haven't always been, shall we say, as white as snow.

So…what do we learn from this?

Discussion Questions:

1. Can Rabbi Meir and Beruriah teach us something about guilt by association? They don't seem to fear it. Should we?

2. If our families and friends are like Rabbi Meir's and Beruriah's, what can they teach us about dealing with the situation?

3. Is it possible that what attracted Rabbi Meir and Beruriah to each other was not only their great intellects but also the fact that they did have this in common?

As always, looking forward to your insights!