

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHY DID ELISHA BEN ABUYA GO WRONG?

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It is easier to reconcile oneself to a person's wickedness if that person is known to be a villain from the start, be it in a story or in life. But when a person goes from an agent of good to an agent of evil it is much more difficult to understand. Why would a person who came from a wealthy family and was a recognized teacher among the sages not only turn his back on Judaism but help others persecute Jews as well?

The sages give us three reasons why Elisha ben Abuya might have gone wrong:

(1) Why did all this happen to him? Once Elisha was sitting and studying in the plain of Gennesaret, and he saw a man climb to the top of a palm tree, take a mother bird with her young, and descend safely. The following day he saw another man climbing to the top of the palm tree; he took the young birds but released the mother. When he descended a snake bit him and he died. Elisha thought: It is written, "If you chance to come upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young;] you shall let the mother go, but the young shall you take to yourself; that it may go well with you, and that you may live long. (Deuteronomy 22:6f)" "Where is the welfare of this man, and where his length of days?"

He did not know that R. Jacob had explained it before him: "That it may go well with you" in the World to Come which is wholly good, "And that you may live long" in the time which is wholly long.

(2) Some say [he defected] because he saw the tongue of Rabbi Judah the Baker, dripping blood, in the mouth of a dog. He said: This is the Torah, and this its reward! This is the tongue that was bringing for the words of the Torah as befits them. This is the tongue that labored in the Torah all its days. This is the Torah, and this its reward! It seems as though there is no reward [for righteousness] and no resurrection of the dead.

(3) But some say that when his mother was pregnant with him, she passed by some heathen temples and smelled their particular kind of incense. And that odor pierced her body like the poison of a snake. (Y. Hagigah 2:1, 77b)

Discussion Questions:

1. The sages offer three reasons why Elisha might have gone wrong. He took the text of the Torah literally and decided he did not want to worship what he thought was an unjust God. A sense of injustice, this time a graver one, a great sage is murdered and mutilated despite all his good deeds and learning, leads Elisha to believe that the enterprise of Torah study is a vain one. The third theory is interesting and different. Through no fault of her own (she did not enter the temples) and certainly through no fault of Elisha's, then in the womb, Elisha is destined to fall. If you had to choose one of these reasons as the most likely, which would it be? Do you think all three could have, combined, moved Elisha to forsake Judaism?
2. The exclamation, "This is Torah and this is its reward!" occurs in only two other places in the Bavli (B. Menachot 29b and B. Berachot 61b). It is the ultimate heresy. When the righteous are violently cut low, May you

call God unjust or can you find ways to explain it. How would you do either of these things? Can you do both?

3. Are some people simply "born bad"? If so, if a person is destined for a life of violence, crime and hate, and if we, with genetic testing could know this, should we allow that person to come into the world?

I look forward to your answers!

P.S. I imagine that you, as have I, have been receiving your requests for "end of the year" donations. Please consider printing this out and putting Maqom in the stack. Maqom is run on a shoestring and donations large and small are appreciated.