

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

RABBI AKIBA ON AMBITION

Rabbi Akiba was a person with great ambition and drive. It is doubtful that he could otherwise have achieved so much with such a late start in his life. Yet, in the passage we study here, we find that Rabbi Akiba urges one not to show one's ambition but to present an attitude of humility. This, perhaps, is one of the great spiritual "balancing acts" that Rabbi Akiba achieved so well: he had ambition yet he recognized the importance of humility.

This passage appears in the midrash collection Leviticus Rabbah. Leviticus Rabbah reached closure around 400-500 C.E. and is comprised of a set of thirty-seven topical essays. This midrash collection takes the literal meanings of the verses and uses them as jumping off points for essays on rabbinic values. It is the rabbinization, if one could call it that, of the most priestly of books, Leviticus.

The Text:

Rabbi Joshua of Siknin in the name of Rabbi Levi expounded the verse, "For better is it that it be said to you: Come up hither, than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince (Proverbs 25:7)." Rabbi Akiba taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai: Go two to three seats lower and take your seat until they say to you, "Come up" rather than that you should go up and they should say to you, "Go down." Better that people say to you, "come up, come up" and not say to you, "go down go down." (Leviticus Rabbah 1:5)

In the Academy, scholars were seated according to priority order in terms of learning, not simply by seniority. One's place had to be earned. Here, Rabbi Akiba is advising that it is better to underestimate your knowledge and have those in charge of the Academy urge you to move higher in its hierarchy rather than take a seat higher than one you've truly earned.

Discussion Questions:

1. Under what circumstances can ambition be a force for good? How can it be a force for evil? What makes the difference?
2. This passage comes in an entire essay which emphasizes Moses' humility and the fact that it was to him that God called. Why would God want to call on a more humble person?