

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

DON'T DREAM A LITTLE DREAM ABOUT AHER!

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Within tractate Berachot in the Bavli (B. Berachot 55a-57b) we find an enormous sugya about dreams and dream interpretation. Suprisingly, Aher turns up in this passage. The passage goes through what it means when one sees certain kings, books of Tanach and sages in one's dreams.

There are three students of the sages [significant for dreams].
If one sees Ben 'Azzai in a dream, he may hope for piety;
if Ben Zoma, he may hope for wisdom;
if Aher, let him fear for punishment. (B. Berachot 57b)

Hopefully, something should strike you as odd about this passage. Who's missing?

The primary text about these sages is this one:

Four entered the orchard/garden/Paradise (take you pick): Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Akiba. The first gazed and perished, the second gazed and was smitten, the third gazed and cut down sprouts and the fourth went up whole and came down whole. (T. Hagigah2:3)

So far we have this grid:

Dreaming of Ben Azzai who dies in Paradise is a sign of piety (chasideut, in the Hebrew)
Dreaming of Ben Zoma, who never manages to fully come back to earth is a sign of wisdom (chochmah)
Dreaming of Aher, who becomes a destroyer of Jews, is a sign of punishment (hapuranot).

These seem to be logical relationships. But we are left scratching our heads and asking, "Why isn't Rabbi Akiba in this passage?" We aren't the only ones. One manuscript says seeing Rabbi Akiba in a dream is a sign of either piety or wisdom. Another, Avot d'Rabbi Natan 40:11 says that seeing Rabbi Akiba in a dream is a sign of punishment. But that would still leave us with a lack of symmetry and a complete accounting of what seeing each of these four sages in a dream means. This is where the fun begins. Let's step right up to the plate and make our own interpretations.

To aid you in this endeavor, let me note that in this passage, piety, wisdom and punishment are not our only options. Greatness, consolation, riches and miracles are associated with other things seen in dreams.

Discussion Questions:

1. Using the schema of the Talmud, how would you "repair" this passage? How would you write it if it were completely up to you?
2. Dream interpretation is an ancient part of Judaism (e.g., the dreams of Jacob and Joseph). Do dreams have power? If so, what sort of power is it and from whence does that power come?