

## **Babylonian Talmud *Hagigah* 14b-15a**

The subject of the *mishnah* being commented on is appropriate and inappropriate subjects for public discourse; the *gemara* (commentary on the *mishnah*) immediately preceding this was speaking of mystical teachings.

The rabbis taught:

Four men went up into the heavenly garden (*pardes* = "paradise"), and they were:

Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, *Aher* and R. Akiba.

Ben Azzai gazed and died; to him the scriptural passage may be applied [Ps. 116:15]: "Grievous in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his pious ones (i.e., *ascetics*)."

Ben Zoma gazed and went mad; to him the scriptural passage may be applied [Prov. 25: 16] "Have you found honey (i.e., *wisdom*)? Eat so much as is sufficient for you, lest you consume too much of it, and have to vomit it forth."

*Aher* cut the plants.

R. Akiba departed in peace.

*Aher* cut the plants; it is to him that the scriptural passage may be applied [Eccl. 5:6]: "Suffer not your mouth to cause your body to sin."

There came out a heavenly voice and said [Jer. 3:14]: "Return, O backsliding children" (except *Aher*).

When he (*Aher*) learned it he said: Inasmuch as that man (*Aher*) is excluded from yonder world, let him go and enjoy himself in this world. *Aher* went forth into evil courses.

*Aher* asked this question of R. Meir, after he had gone forth into evil courses: What is the meaning of the passage [Eccl. 7:14]: "Also this has God made in equal measure with the other"?

He (Meir) answered him (*Aher*): Everything which the Holy One, blessed be He, created, He created with its counterpart. He created mountains; He created hills: He created seas; He created rivers.

He (*Aher*) said to him (Meir): R. Akiba your teacher did not say so, but he explained it as meaning that He created righteous; He created sinners. He created the Garden of Eden (i.e., heaven); He created Gehenna (i.e., hell). To every individual belongs two shares, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehenna. If one is meritorious and righteous, he receives his own portion and also the portion of his neighbor in the Garden of Eden. If he has incurred guilt, he receives his own portion and also the portion of his neighbor in Gehenna. [R. Mesharshia said: What is the Scripture proof? As regards the righteous it is written [Is. 61:7]: "Therefore in their hand shall they possess a twofold (portion)"; as regards the wicked it is said [Jer. 17:18]: "And strike them with a double breach."]

*Aher* asked again of R. Meir: What is the meaning of the passage [Job 28:17]: "She cannot be estimated after gold and glass; and not in exchange for her (can) vessels of refined gold (be taken)"?

He (Meir) answered him (*Aher*): These are the words of the Law, which are difficult to buy, as vessels of gold and of pure gold, and are easily lost, as vessels of glass.

He (*Aher*) said to him (Meir): R. Akiba your teacher did not say so, but he explained it as meaning that as vessels of gold and vessels of glass, although they are broken, may be mended, so a disciple of the sages, although he have sinned, may be mended.

He (Meir) said to him (*Aher*): Return yourself also.

He (*Aher*) answered him (Meir): I have already heard from behind the curtain [Jer. 3:14]: "Return, O backsliding children" (except *Aher*).

The rabbis taught: It happened that *Aher* was riding upon his horse on the Sabbath, and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn the Law from his mouth.

He (*Aher*) said to him: Meir, turn thee backwards, for I have already measured by means of my horse's hoofs up to this point the legal limit of the Sabbath.

He (Meir) answered him: Return you also.

He (*Aher*) said to him: And have I not already answered you what I have heard from behind the curtain?

He (*Aher*) forced him (Meir) to enter a place of lecturing. He (*Aher*) said to a child: Repeat for me your verse.

He said to him (*Aher*) [Is. 48:22]: "There is no peace, says the Lord, unto the wicked."

He brought him (Meir) to another synagogue, until he had brought him into thirteen synagogues. They all repeated to him the same way.

In the last one he (a child) said to him (*Aber*): Repeat for me your verse.

He said to him [Ps. 1:16]: "But unto the wicked (*u-l'roshta*) God says: What have you to do to relate my statutes, and why do you bear my covenant upon your mouth?"

That child was a stammerer. It sounded as if he had said: "And to Elisha (*u-l'Elisha*) said God," etc.

And he (*Aber*) said: If there had been a knife in my hand I would have cut him in pieces.

When *Aber* died it was said: Let him not be brought into judgment [punished] (since he has studied the Law), but let him not be admitted to the world to come [into heaven] (since he sinned).

R. Meir said: It would have been better if he would have been brought to judgment and punished, and then admitted to the world to come. I wish I would die, in order that smoke should go up from his grave (*i.e.*, that he should be brought to judgment).

When R. Meir died it was so: smoke went up from the grave of *Aber*.

Said R. Johanan: A mighty deed it was to consign his teacher to the flames. There was one among us, and we should not find a way to save him? If I take him by the hand, who will snatch him away from me? Would that I might die and extinguish the smoke from his grave.

And it was so. When R. Johanan died the smoke ceased from the grave of *Aber*.

The public mourner then uttered this expression over him: Even the keeper of the door of Gehenna stood not his ground before thee, O our teacher!

The daughter of *Aber* came to Rabbi and asked him for food. He said to her: Whose daughter are you?

She answered: I am the daughter of *Aber*.

And he said to her: Is there still of his seed in the world? Is it not written [Job 18:19]: "He will have neither son nor grandson among his people, nor any that escapes in the places of his sojourning"?

She said to him: Remember his studiousness, and not his deeds.

Immediately there came down fire, and consumed the seat of Rabbi.

Rabbi wept and said: And if those who disgrace themselves through it, are honored thus, how much more those who obtain praise through their use of it.

How did R. Meir study the Law from the mouth of *Aber*? Have we not learned that if it is not certain that the rabbi is equal to an angel, no instruction must be received from him?

Said Resh Lakish: R. Meir interpreted the following passage thus [Prov. 22:17]: "Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart unto my knowledge." It is not written, "Unto *their* knowledge (*i.e.*, the sages)," but "unto *my* knowledge (*i.e.*, God's)."

R. Hanina said the following passage [Ps. 45:11]: "Hearken, O daughter, and look and incline your ear, and forget your own people, and your father's houses," etc.

But do not these passages contradict each other? Nay, the one is the case of an adult, the other of a young person (who cannot distinguish between good and evil).

When R. Dimi came he said: They say in the West (*i.e.*, in Palestine): R. Meir, while eating the date, he threw away the stone (*i.e.*, he picked out the good and threw away the bad teachings).

Rabha expounded the meaning of the passage [Song of Songs 6:11]: "Into the nut-garden was I gone down, to look about among the plants of the valley," etc.

Why are scholars likened to a nut? It means to say that, as a nut, although soiled, what is within it is clean: so also, although a scholar has sinned, his study of the law is not rejected.

Rabba bar Shila met Elijah and said to him: What is the Holy One, blessed be He, doing?

He answered him: He had uttered doctrine in the name of all other rabbis, but in the name of R. Meir He had not uttered.

He said to him: Why?

Because he learned doctrine from the mouth of *Aber*.

He said to him again: Why? R. Meir found a pomegranate. He ate its inside and cast away its husk.

He answered him: He is at this moment saying: Meir my son is speaking and says: At the time that men were afflicted, the Shekhina (*i.e.*, God's Spirit) used the following language: My head and my arm are heavy on me (*i.e.*, I am sorry that the men I have created have to die for their sins). If the Holy One, blessed

be he, is thus grieved when the blood of wicked men is poured out, how much more when the blood of the righteous man is poured out.

Samuel found R. Jehudah when the latter was swinging upon the bolt of a door and weeping. He said to him: Is it a small thing that is written concerning the rabbis [Is. 33:18]: "Where is he who wrote down? where is he that weighed? where is he that counted the towers"?

"Where is he that counted?" for they counted all the letters that are in the Books of the Law.

"Where is he that weighed?" for they weighed the light and the heavy things which are in the Law.

"Where is he that counted the towers?" for they taught three hundred doctrines concerning the tower which flies in the air.

And R. Ami said: Three hundred questions were treated by Doeg and Ahithophel concerning the tower which flies in the air. And we learned, however, in a Mishna (Tract Sanhedrin, chap. xi. 1): Three kings and four private persons have no position in the world to come, and we--what will there be for us?

He said to him: Oh, clever one, there was uncleanness in their hearts.

It was said about *Aber*: Greek melody ceased not from his mouth, as it was said of him (*Aber*), that at the time when he stood up to go out of the college many books of the *minim* used to fall from his lap.

Nimus of Gardi asked R. Meir: Does all wool which goes down to the dyeing-vat come up with the right color?

He answered him: All which was clean on its mother's (sheep's) back does so come up; all which was not clean on its mother's back does not so come up.

It is said above: R. Akiba went into the heavenly garden in peace and came down from it in peace. And it is to him that the scriptural passage may be applied [Song of Songs 1:4]: "Oh, draw me! after thee will we run."

Nevertheless R. Akiba was also in danger of being thrust away by the angels, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Leave this elder, for he is worthy to avail himself of My glory.

What kept R. Akiba from being misled, as was *Aber*? The passage [1 Kings 19:11, 12]: "But not in the wind was the Lord; and after the wind was an earthquake, but not in the earthquake was the Lord; and after the earthquake was a fire, but not in the fire was the Lord; and after the fire was the sound of a soft whisper. And, behold, the Lord passed by" (*i.e.*, from the whisper he understood that there was the Shekhina).