

ACHER, THE REWARD FOR TORAH LEARNING

Background

One of the greatest individuals who ever lived was Rebbe Elisha ben Avuyah. While he began his career as one of the leading Torah sages in Israel, that wasn't how he ended it. He became a heretic and fought against everything that he had built. According to the Marhasha, by the end of his life, he might well have achieved the title of the most wicked person who ever lived.

When he left the Torah way, all of his students left him — with the exception of Rebbe Meir. Rebbe Meir felt that “he could take out the juice and discard the pulp.” He thought he could safely learn from this man.

When Elisha ben Avuyah died, they wouldn't accept him into Gehenom because he had learned Torah, but they wouldn't accept him into Gan Eden because he sinned. Rebbe Meir begged for mercy so that his Rebbe could be accepted into Gehenom.

Questions

How is it merciful to ask for a man to be burnt in Gehenom? The fires of Gehenom are sixty times hotter than any fire on earth. Why would the Gemara consider it a favor for Rebbe Meir to pray for Elisha ben Avuyah this way?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף יד/ב

תנו רבנן ארבעה נכנסו בפרדס ואלו הן בן עזאי ובן זומא אחר ורבי עקיבא בן עזאי הציץ ומת עליו הכתוב אומר יקר בעיני ה' המותה לחסידיו בן זומא הציץ ונפגע ועליו הכתוב אומר דבש מצאת אכול דייך פן תשבענו והקאתו אחר קיציץ בנטיעות רבי עקיבא יצא בשלום

Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the “Garden,” and they were: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them, “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say, ‘Water, water!’ for it is said, ‘He who speaks falsehood shall not be established before Mine eyes.’” Ben Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” Ben Zoma looked and became demented. Of him Scripture says, “Have you found honey? Eat only as much as is sufficient for you, lest you be filled with it and vomit it out.” Acher mutilated the shoots. Only Rabbi Akiva departed unhurt.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו/א

תנו רבנן מעשה באחר שהיה רוכב על הסוס בשבת והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו אמר לו מאיר חזור לאחריך שכבר שיערתי בעקבי סוסי עד כאן תחום שבת אמר ליה אף אתה חזור בך אמר ליה ולא כבר אמרתי לך כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר

Our Rabbis taught: Once Acher was riding on a horse on the Sabbath, and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from him. Acher said, “Meir, turn back, for I have measured by the paces of my horse that we have reached the Sabbath limit. He replied, “You, too, must go back!” Acher answered, “Have I not already told you that I have already heard from behind the veil: “Return you backsliding children — except Acher.”

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו/ב

כי נח נפשיה דאחר אמרי לא מידן לידייניה ולא לעלמא דאתי ליתי לא מידן לידייניה משום דעסק באורייתא ולא לעלמא דאתי ליתי משום דחטא אמר רבי מאיר מוטב דלידייניה ולייתי לעלמא דאתי מתי אמות ואעלה עשן מקברו כי נח נפשיה דרבי מאיר סליק קוטרא מקבריה דאחר

When Acher died, in Heaven they said, “He's not allowed in Gehenom, nor is he allowed into Gan Eden. He's not allowed into Gehenom because he was involved in Torah study. He's not allowed into Gan Eden because he sinned.” Rebbe Meir said, “When I die, I will cause a pillar of smoke to rise from his grave.” When Rebbe Meir died, a pillar of smoke rose from the grave of Acher.