

Elisha ben Abuya and three other scholars studied together in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. In addition to studying the texts with each other, they did what many of our sages did, experimented with getting as close physically and spiritually with God as possible. But we learn in our Talmud, in tractate, *Hagigah* that 'four men entered paradise (the Hebrew word is *pardes*)...*Ben Azzai* looked and died; *Ben Zoma* looked and went mad; *Elisha ben Abuya* cut the roots; *Akiva* entered in peace and departed in peace.' In the interpretations of this mysterious and cryptic statement, it is assumed that these four men somehow were able to get physically close to God.

It seems clear that neither *Ben Zoma* nor *Ben Azzai* could tolerate the closeness they achieved. That's not surprising since we know that God tells Moshe that no person can see God and live. *Rebbe Akiva* somehow was able to come close to God and survive that experience peacefully. We'll look at that later.

Let's try to understand what happened to *Alisha Ben Abuya* when he cut the roots. One modern interpretation of that statement relies on two verses from our portion for this week.

In chapter 22, verses 6-7 we learn, 'if, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother is sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.'

This commandment is one that falls under 'tzaar baalei Hachim,' treating animals in an ethical way.

One of the most interesting parts about it is that we are promised a long and prosperous life. We are promised the same thing if we honor our parents.

Now back to *Elisha ben Abuya*... We have a story in the *Talmud* that contradicts the assumption that if we follow our commandments carefully, we will be rewarded. This story explains how *Elisha* cut the roots.

He and a group of rabbis took a break from their studying to watch a father tell his son to climb a tree to retrieve some eggs. The boy, following two commandments, honoring his father and shooing away the mother bird before taking the young, fell off the ladder and died. After witnessing this event, *Elisha ben Abuyah* said, 'There is no justice and there is no judge.' He cut the roots of his faith in God and in his practicing of Judaism. He who wanted to be as close to God as possible, ended up with no faith when he felt God disappointed him.

We have all experienced this type of disappointment in God and in religion. We have questioned God's existence and His caring about us. Yet as a people we still follow the commandments that promise a reward when there really is no guarantee that there will be one. How do we understand this?

It's important to note that the only person who cut the roots, who lost his faith was *Elisha ben Abuya*. The other rabbis didn't. The father of the boy, who experienced the most pain from this situation, didn't. What is it that kept that father strong enough in his faith that did not sustain *Elisha*?

Perhaps he was willing to feel the force of his loss in a way that *Elisha* could not. The father did not fight the reality of what happened. He did not curse God for

taking his son away. He simply accepted that his son died and was able to grieve over his loss. He could accept that some things cannot be explained logically.

I often say that God does not have a massive calendar where he records the minute details that will happen to us. God is a creative force that exists for us to tap into so that we will also be creative. He is a comforting force that exists for us to lean on when we are in pain. God does not create pain to punish us.

We don't want to be in pain. But when we are, we can either fight it and lose or use it to make us stronger. The boy's father became stronger from it and *Elisha ben Abuya* lost. He expected too much from God. He somehow expected God to be completely consistent, making the world exist in perfect logic. That is impossible.

It's possible that *Rebbe Akiva* survived his encounter with God in peace because he entered it in peace, expecting to meet a loving God and not needing God to prove anything to him. *Elisha* wanted proof of perfect logic from God and from our religion. His faith couldn't survive his disappointment when he did not find that.

During this month of *Elul* as we are moving closer to the High Holidays, let us use the boy's father as our role model. Let us work to accept the pain that we experience as the natural outcome of being alive and let us continue working to accept that reality and as *Rebbe Akiva* did, make peace with it.

Shabbat Shalom.