

*Stay for the night. Then, in the morning, if he will redeem you, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to redeem you, I will redeem you myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning (Ruth 3:13).*

Rabbi Meir was sitting and teaching in the Bet Midrash in Tibereas, when Elisha, his teacher, cut through the street on horseback, on Shabbat.

They said to Rabbi Meir, Elisha your teacher has cut through the street. He went out to Elisha who said to him, what were you engaged in? He said: *And the Lord blessed Job more at the end than at the beginning* (Job 42:12). He said to him: And what did you say regarding this? Rabbi Meir replied: *Blessed* means that he doubled Job's wealth. Elisha said to him: Akiba your master did not teach that. Rather: *The Lord blessed Job at the end more than at the beginning* means that Job was blessed [in the end] because of the teshuvah and good deeds that he accomplished at the beginning.

Elisha said to him: What else did you teach? *Better is the end of a matter than the beginning* (Ecclesiastes 7:8). Elisha said: And what did you say concerning this? Rabbi Meir replied: Let's say you have a situation where one purchases some merchandise in his youth and it loses value but in his old age it becomes valuable and he profits by it. Another interpretation of *Better is the end of a matter than its beginning*: Let's say there is someone who does evil deeds in his youth but in his old age he does good deeds. Another interpretation of *Better is the end of a matter than its beginning*: Let's say you have a person who learned Torah in his youth and forgot it but in his old age he returns to it. Here are examples of *Better is the end of matter than its beginning*.

Elisha replied: Akiba your master did not teach that way. Rather: *Better is the end of a matter when it is good from the beginning*. And here is my tale: Abuyah, my father, was one of the great ones of his generation. When it came time for my brit milah, all of the dignitaries of Jerusalem came, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua among them. And while they were eating and drinking some were singing ballads and some were making up alphabetical ditties. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Joshua: They are engaged in their pass times Let us be engaged in ours. They began with Torah verses and linked the Torah verses to Prophet verses and linked the prophet verses to Writings verses. And the very words were as joyful as when they had been given at Sinai and the fire licked up around them. For wasn't the essence of their presentation at Sinai fire according to what is said: *And the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven* (Deuteronomy 4:11)?

My father said: Since the power of Torah is so great, if this son survives I will give him to Torah. And because his intent was not for the sake of heaven, but for the sake of power, the Torah within me did not survive.

Elisha continued to question Rabbi Meir: And what other verse did you expound? *Gold and glass cannot equal it* (Job 38:17). He replied: These things, gold and glass, are words of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as vessels of gold and as easily lost as glass.

Elisha said to him: Akiba your teacher did not teach that way. He said that just as vessels of gold and glass can be fixed if they are broken, just so, a sage who loses his Torah is able to return to it.

Rabbi Meir said to him: Then you should return. He replied: Why? Elisha now changed the subject: Just here is the Shabbat boundary. Rabbi Meir said: How do you know? Said Elisha: My horse's hoof beats tell me that he has already walked two thousand cubits. Rabbi Meir said: You have all of this knowledge and yet you will not return. Elisha said: It is beyond my power. Rabbi Meir asked: Why? Elisha replied: I was riding on my horse traveling behind the synagogue on Yom Kippur which happened to be on Shabbat. I heard a Bat Kol break forth and say: *Return you backsliding children* (Jeremiah 3:14); *Return to me and I will return to you* (Malachai 3:7)—all except for Elisha ben Abuyah who knew my power yet rebelled against me.

And what was the moment that prompted this rebellion? They said that once he was sitting and learning Mishnah in the valley of Ginosar and he saw a man who had gone up to the top of a palm tree on Shabbat and taken the mother bird away from her chicks and he descended safely. At the end of Shabbat he saw another man who climbed to the top of a palm tree and took the chicks having sent away the mother bird, but when he came down a snake bit him and he died.

He said: It is written *You shall certainly shoo away the mother and then take the chicks for yourself in order that it might go well with you and that you live a long life* (Deuteronomy 22:7). Where is the good for this man and where is his length of days?

Now, he did not know that Rabbi Akiba had given a public derasha: *In order that it might go well with you* means in the world that is all good; and *you shall live a long life* means in the world that is as long as eternity. And there are some who say that the reason for his rebellion is that he had seen the tongue of Rabbi Judah the baker in the mouth of a dog. He said: If the tongue that labored in the Torah all of its days is treated like this, a tongue that is not cunning and does not labor in the Torah, how much more so. He said: If this is the case, then there is no reward for the Tzadikim or for the Scholars. And some say that the root of his rebellion was that when his mother was pregnant with him she passed by idolatrous temples, smelled some of the sacrifices which they offered her and she ate and it spread through her belly like the venom of insects.

Some time later, Elisha ben Abuyah became ill and they came and told Rabbi Meir: Elisha, your teacher is ill. He went to see him.

Rabbi Meir said to him: You should return. Elisha answered: After all of this, will they accept me? Rabbi Meir said: Is it not written: *You return [tashev] a person to dust* (Psalm 90:3) which means, even to the point that a life is ground to the dust one can return. Elisha ben Abuya cried and died. Rabbi Meir rejoiced and said: It seems to me that my teacher departed in a moment of Teshuvah/return.

When they buried him, fire came and burned his grave. They came and told Rabbi Meir: Your teacher's grave is burning. He went out and spread his tallit over Elisha's grave. Rabbi Meir said to him: *Stay for the night. Then, in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem* (Ruth 3:13).

*Then, in the morning* —that is to say, in the world that is all good, *if the good one will redeem you, let him redeem*—this is the Blessed Holy one, as it is said: *The Lord is good to all* (Psalm 145:9). *But if he does not want to redeem you, I will redeem you myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning* (Ruth 3:13) and the fire died down.

Rabbi Meir's students asked him: Master, in the World to Come, if they say to you, "Whom do you desire, your father or your teacher," what will you answer? He said: First my father and then my teacher. They said to him, and will they listen to your request? He replied: Is there not a Mishnah which speaks to this? The case of a scroll may be saved together with the scroll and the case of the Tefillin together with the Tefillin (Mishnah Shabbat 16:1)? Elisha will be saved by the merit of his Torah.

Sometime later the daughters of Elisha came to beg alms from Rabbi Judah HaNasi. He cited the verse: *Let there be none to extend kindness to him; neither let there be any to be gracious to his fatherless children* (Psalm 109:12). They said to him: Master, do not pay attention to his acts, pay attention to his Torah. At this, Rabbi Judah HaNasi wept and ordered that they should be given a stipend. He said: If one whose Torah was not for the glory of God produced such children how much more so he whose Torah was for the glory of God?

Ruth Rabbah 6:4