

MTEI Graduate Study Session
September 9, 2014

We had a large group of grads who participated in the year's opening study session via conference call on September 9th. Barry Holtz taught texts about the early life of Rabbi Akiva, focusing in on the story told in the midrashic text Avot D'Rabbi Natan about how Akiva has a life-transforming experience at age 40 as he looks at the effect that water has in wearing down rock. If water can wear down something as hard as rock, Akiva thinks, surely the study of Torah can change something as "soft" as my own human heart. With that insight Akiva goes off (with his son) to begin his Jewish learning.

This insight comes upon Akiva out of the blue. He was merely looking at the formation of a natural well of water. We have no idea from the story directly why Akiva may have thought his heart needed to be transformed, although we looked at one text in which Akiva—by then a great sage—looks back on his early life and regrets what a nasty person he was before he began to study Torah. This may give us a hint about why he was so affected by seeing the water wearing away the rock. Or perhaps, as some in our group suggested, he had been contemplating a change for a long time. Or perhaps it was his stage of life—forty years old and wondering about the meaning of his life. Or perhaps it is because he had a young son and wanted to lead a different life for the sake of his child. All these possibilities were raised in our conversation.

The story itself is particularly relevant to the time of year in which we find ourselves now—amidst the month of Elul, only two weeks before Rosh HaShanah. Our thoughts naturally turn to the great theme of the Jewish season—what does it mean to “do *teshuvah*” to commit ourselves to change. There is a famous poem by the great German poet Rilke called “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” In that poem the speaker visits a museum and sees an ancient Greek sculpture of Apollo. As he looks at the statue he is suffused with a sense both of its beauty and its mystery. The stone statue, even as a torso without a head, seems to be looking right at him. The poem ends with the striking words: “You must change your life.” For the Rilke character this happens in encountering a work of art from the distant past. For Rabbi Akiva it is in encountering the power of a natural phenomenon—water and stone. And through the experience of Akiva, the greatest of all the rabbis, all of us might learn: one never knows what can bring us to change but as the Days of Awe approach let us think about how we too can move toward.