

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

### "A TALMUD TALE" PREMIERS THIS FEBRUARY IN HOUSTON, TX!

Posted January 18, 2007, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

## THE BAR MITZVAH BLESSING

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2007

Few people probably know that the traditional blessing said over a bar mitzvah is not shehecheyanu, the blessing for happy things, but rather a blessing of relief: "Whew! I'm not liable for your mistakes anymore!" It comes from this midrash in Genesis Rabbah:

And the boys grew (Genesis 25:27) R. Pinhas said in R. Levi's name: They were like a myrtle and a wild rose-bush growing side by side. When they grew to maturity, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. R. Eleazar ben R. Simeon said: A man is responsible for his son until the age of thirteen; thereafter he must say: "Blessed is He who has now freed me from the responsibility of this boy." (Genesis Rabbah (Toldot) 63:10)

This text shows us the characteristic branding of Esau as the villain and Jacob as the hero, anachronistically showing them in "study house mode." Obviously, there was no house of Torah study for Jacob to attend. This is a frequent technique the sages use when they wish to portray a biblical person as righteous: they cast him as a scholar. Esau/Rome is devoted to idolatry and Jacob/Israel is devoted to Judaism, so Esau must be wicked. It is from this passage, we see, that the blessing said at a bar (or bat) mitzvah is derived. This blessing is still the liturgical standard blessing today (although many other, perhaps more loving, alternatives have been invented since then).

### Discussion Questions:

1. What blessing would you say is appropriate for the occasion of bar/bat mitzvah today? Does this one still fit? What would you say?
2. When do you think parents today feel this sense of lifting of liability? When their children are 18? 21? Married? Provided them grandchildren?