

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted January 19, 2006 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### TALMUD, LIES AND THE INTERNET: A FORM OF ANTI-SEMITISM ON THE WEB, PART II

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As we continue examining anti-Semitic comments about the Talmud on the Web we find this very odd entry:

#### Penalty for Disobeying Rabbis

Erubin 21b. Whosoever disobeys the rabbis deserves death and will be punished by being boiled in hot excrement in hell.

This is exceptionally puzzling as the Talmud extremely rarely mentions punishments in the World to Come with such specification. Indeed, I have never heard this punishment in the World to Come described anywhere in all my years of studying rabbinic literature.

Let's take a look at what the passage actually says. It is a story of Rabbi Akiba near the end of his life when he was jailed by the Roman authorities. Rabbi Akiba received only one ration of water per day and used some of it to ritually wash his hands. If there was only enough water for hand washing, he would perform that mitzvah and not drink any water until the next day.

Now, the mitzvah of ritually washing one's hands is a rabbinic edict, not a mitzvah found in the Torah. Nonetheless, when asked to explain why Rabbi Akiba found this mitzvah to be of such importance, he replied:

What can I do, because on account of neglecting the words of the sages one deserves death? Better that I should die than transgress the words of my colleagues...When the sages heard of this incident they said: If he was so scrupulous in old age how much more must he have been so in his youth. And if he was this observant in a jail how much more must he have been so when he was free. (B. Eruvin 21b)

This is a pretty standard story telling of the super-human spiritual power of one of rabbinic literature's great heroes. It is natural that he would want to honor the sages' words as highly as the Torah's. When read in context, there's nothing terribly surprising about this statement.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Now that you know that the statement is not made as an authoritative one but as part of a hero tale, does that change your understanding of it?
2. Why do you think someone would at the bit about punishment in the World to Come to the statement? What does this say about them?
3. What else can we do to further a general understanding of rabbinic literature on the internet?