

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted February 29, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

EVERY GOLDEN AGE ENDS

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2004

At the end of the Mishnah tractate Sotah, there is an extraordinary set of mishnahs mishnah (**M. Sotah 9:9-15**) which outlines the progressive decay of the Jewish world into non-observance and unhappiness. For example, the practice of using the bitter waters to determine if a wife had been faithful to her husband was no longer practiced since adultery was so rife (**M. Sotah 9:9**). Once the Temple was destroyed each day had its own curse and the flavor of the fruit disappeared.

The last mishnah of the tractate details what was lost to the Jewish people when different sages died.

When Rabbi Meir died, composers of parables were no more.

When Ben Azzai died industrious scholars were no more.

When ben Zoma died makers of midrashim were no more.

When Rabbi Yehoshua died goodness left the world....

When Rabbi Akiba died the glory of the Torah was no more.

Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: From the day that the Temple was destroyed, the sages are like school teachers and schoolteachers are like cantors and cantors are like ignoramuses and ignoramuses become ever weaker and there is no one [from whom] to ask [for help]. On whom shall we rely? On our Father who is in heaven.

In printed editions of this mishnah, the tractate ends with a "game plan" for returning to a state of grace:

Rabbi Pinchas ben Ya'ir says:

Zeal leads to cleanliness

And cleanliness leads to purity

And purity leads to self-restraint

And self-restraint leads to holiness

And holiness leads to humility

And humility leads to fear of sin

And fear of sin leads to piety

And piety leads to the Holy Spirit

And the Holy Spirit leads to the revival of the dead

And the revival of the dead comes because of Elijah, whose memory is a blessing. Amen. (**M. Sotah 9:15**)

This mishnah outlines what Jewish generations lose when their great teachers die and their great institutions were destroyed. The body of the mishnah itself offers scant hope: only God can undo the damage and give us back what we had. Apparently, later readers of the mishnah were not satisfied with such an ending and so prescribed a way for us to find our way back to better states of being.

I bring this passage for study now due to the concern that seems to have been raised by the release of Mel Gibson's movie about Jesus. At this point, I do not know if it will result in any short term or long term anti-Semitism. However, if Jewish history teaches us anything, it is that every golden age comes to an end. We were welcomed into Spain, Poland, the Ukraine, Germany, etc. and then expelled or killed. In general, those who were young and poor left while those who were richer and older stayed and died.

I have no doubt, also, that the further into the past incidents occur the more they are "telescoped". I used to think that the plagues in Egypt took place over 10 days when it now seems far more reasonable to think of them happening over a year's time at least. In 2,000 years, it will likely appear that the emigration from Germany and Russia, the foundation of the State of Israel and the Holocaust will all be told as if they happened simultaneously, in a single moment. We, of course, know that the truth is far more complex.

So it is with all this in mind that I put the following questions to you for discussion.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do we lose with each passing generation? Should we concentrate on what we lose or on what replaces it?
2. Has the Jewish community dealt well with this movie's release? Is its release a sign that the American golden age of Judaism is ending? If so, what should the community's response be? What might individual Jews do?
3. Those who added the step-by-step program to the end of this mishnah seem to be saying that no matter how low any individual or community has sunk they can always rise again. Why do you think this program starts with "zeal"?