

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted March 25, 1999 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Making the Journey Through Illness a Journey Through Heaven (conclusion)

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Dear Friends,

This is the last of our "seven stages of heaven" study pieces. Please take a look at the pictures of the installation if you haven't done so. From here on out we will be studying the relationship of Mishnah to Gemara, particularly as it relates to some passages having to do with Rabbi Akiba.

Enjoy!

Judy Abrams

Step Five: Know Before Whom You Stand, Milk, Know the Limits of Medicine

The next level of heaven is called *ma'on* and it is where the ministering angels are said to dwell. The Ministering Angels advise God. For example, they inform God what the correct mourning customs are (Lamentations Rabbah 1:1 ¶1) and together the Ministering Angels and God mourn the destruction of the Temple (B. Hagigah 5b and Lamentations Rabbah Proem 24 and 1:2 ¶23). They accompany the Shekhinah (B. Megillah 29a) and wait on God (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1 ¶5).

They look at human behavior, sometimes with a judgmental eye. The Ministering Angels have an ambivalent, sometimes rivalrous, relationship with humanity; i. e., "the general public". On the one hand, God stills their voices by day in order to hear Israel's praise (B. Hagigah 12b) and humanity's songs are prized more dearly by God than the angels' (B. Hullin 91b-92a). Indeed, the Ministering Angels protest humanity's creation (B. Sanhedrin 38b, Mekhilta Beshallah 7, Genesis Rabbah 8:5) as did the sages (B. Eruvin 13b). On the other hand, the Ministering Angels help human beings, such as Adam (B. Shabbat 55b) and Esther (B. Megillah 15b, 16a). They dance at Moses' wedding (B. Sotah 12a) and help Israel at the crossing of the Red Sea (Mekhilta, Bahodesh 9, Ex 20:15-19). In addition, both God and the Ministering Angels are portrayed as subordinate to Israel in the matter of the declaration of the new year (Y. Rosh Hashanah 1:3, 57b).

The graphic representation of the Ministering Angels, here, are the eyes who look upon us. We must be conscious, always, before Whom we pray:

Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, his disciples went in to visit him. They said to him: Master, teach us the paths of life so that we may through them win the life of the future world. He said to them: Be solicitous for the honor of your colleagues, and keep your children from [over-academic, philosophical] meditation, and set them between the knees of scholars, and when you pray know before whom you are standing and in this way you will win the future world. (B. Berachot 28b)

This schematic form of the eye is often seen in a Jewish contemplative art form called the shiviti, derived from the verse, "*Shiviti Adonai l'negdi tamid.*" "I will constantly set God before me. (Psalm 16:8)" The worshipper may stand

and stare into these eyes, as if staring into the eyes of heaven.

The material here is polarfleece and has the texture and color of milk: comforting and soft. Milk is the ultimate nurturing food and, yet, can be spoiled as can any other fluid:

Just as [milk] can only be preserved in the most inferior of vessels, so too the words of Torah endure only with him who is meek....Another explanation: Just as these three liquids can become unfit for consumption only through inattention, so too the words of the Torah are forgotten only through inattention. (B. Taanit 7a-b)

Milk, perhaps more than any other fluid, is perishable. Torah, too, can perish when we fail to pay attention to it. This is the message of this level: paying attention to life, to the gifts we have while we have them. To see our lives as the angels see them is the goal of the enlightened life.

There comes a moment when we see clearly that there is a limit to our cure. Even if we have a successful operation, we will never look or feel the way we did before. This is chronic and serious and even if it can be well-managed it's not going to go away. We are not going to be able to do some of the things we did before. It's humiliating on one level because we used to be the strong ones, the able ones, the ones that would help with all the chores and do everything ourselves.

But there comes a moment when we know not only before *whom* we stand but before *what* we stand. Even worse, we realize that it isn't even *before* us. It's *in* us. We have a condition which has permanently changed us. The things we so took for granted are gone now: the ability to sleep easily, heal quickly, move without restriction, read without taking off our glasses, are gone.

Why is it so hard to appreciate what you have while you have it? If there is great learning to be done, it is here, at this phase. You feel like trouble knows your address now and yet, with some self-awareness, you look around and realize that you don't know trouble nearly as badly as many other folks. This is a delicate balance. On the one hand, your pain is real. What is happening to you is shattering, literally shattering, and oughtn't to be diminished. You are struggling and sometimes you just feel like giving up. And yet, and yet, there are the friends that won't let you slip through the cracks, the work that still brings you joy, the volunteering that still brings meaning, the prayer that still, miraculously, works.

This is often the loneliest stretch of the road, too. Folks are, understandably, there for you during the surgeries and at the crisis points. But you have to tough this long-term adjustment out basically on your own. And then it comes down to knowing before whom you stand: not just God, but your family and your community. It would be easy to give up except that you're not alone. You have a community of angels, too, that is watching what you do. There is no easy road through this passage, or at least none that I've found. It's a journey of loss and despair and adjustment.

Step Six: Coming Close to Where Heaven and Earth Touch, Water, Surgery

With this level of heaven, *makon*, wherein are laid up the stores of snow, hail, harmful dews and rain, storms, cave vapors and their doors are fire, we approach the awesome closeness to God. In addition, with the tulle and then satin of the next phase, we are approaching the sense of a wedding with the Divine. Much of Jewish mystical tradition uses the symbolism of a wedding ceremony to express a union with God. The tulle is covered here with silver spangles, representing water as light shines through it.

This level of heaven is the level of water which reflects, which purifies, without which we cannot survive:

Why are the words of Torah likened unto water...This is to teach you, just as water flows from a higher level to a lower, so too the words of the Torah endure only with him who is meekminded...Just as these three liquids [water, wine and milk] can become unfit for consumption only through inattention, so too the words of the Torah are forgotten only through inattention. (B. Taanit 7a-b)

Just as water endures forever, so do words of Torah live forever....Just as water cleanses the unclean of

their uncleannesses, so do words of Torah cleans the unclean of their uncleannesses...Just as water restores a man's soul...so do words of Torah restore a man's soul...Just as water is forever free to everyone, so are words of Torah forever free to everyone...Just as water is priceless, so are words of Torah priceless. (Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 48)

In Torah, itself, God's words are likened to rain and water from heaven:

Give ear O heavens, that I may speak,

Hear, O earth, the utterance of my mouth.

Let my teaching drip like rain,

Let my words flow like dew,

Like droplets on new-growth,

Like showers on grass.

For the name of YHWH I proclaim,

Give greatness to our God!

The Rock, whole-and-perfect are his deeds,

For all his ways are just. (Deuteronomy 32:1-4, Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995)

Now, you probably noticed that, though water is generally thought to be God's greatest blessing, the water of this level of heaven is unnatural water, not rain water. It's water that seeps up from the ground where folks are buried or comes down in odd forms.

This is like the world of surgeries and invasive procedures, often performed in operating rooms where one enters a land of death. The patient is, literally, made dead to the world through anesthesia. Having been through many such procedures in the space of a year, I can testify to how much one's attitude toward this process changes with experience. The first few times I was to go under, I was quite frightened, wanted to see the surgeon beforehand to assure myself that he didn't look too hung over and so forth. I became frightened. I was sure I was going to get the hip replacement the person in the next bed was slated for. Oddly, after the fourth or fifth surgery, I became pretty blasé about the pre-operation ward.

There is one simple thing which can make the process less frightening and alienating. I discovered, in one of my journeys into the pre-op ward, that the words from Micah, "Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly (Micah 6:8)" came to my mind. I said them over and over again as they embody the essence of all of Judaism (B. Makkot 24a). This served to focus my mind and soul away from the awesome environment in which I found myself and toward a comforting place of simplicity and righteousness. Each person will naturally want to find his or her own verse to recite in such a situation. This is a simple technique, but actually a useful one.

I don't want to make surgery seem a uniformly negative experience. It is, in fact, life-saving in every sense of those words. To be able to be relieved of wretched pain, to be rid of a cancer, to be healed is one of the great miracles of our time and the doctors, nurses and technicians who do these acts of healing are to be praised and thanked. I am profoundly grateful to my surgeons. But we should not ignore how fearsome the day of surgery can be.

Step Seven: Union With God and with the Tree of Life, Acceptance

The last phase in the journey through the seven levels of heaven is called *aravot*. This is where Right and Judgement

and charity, the treasures of life, peace, blessing, the souls of the righteous and the souls which are yet to be born and from whence God will revive the dead all reside. These are symbolized by the tree of life. The white satin and bridal ornaments, shaped as trees, remind the journeyer that the ultimate union with God is death that is the beginning of life eternal. It is not a thing to be feared, but a goal toward which we are all tending.

The Torah is likened, often, to a tree of life. "Her [wisdom, i.e., Torah] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who hold her strongly and happy are those who hold her fast. (Proverbs 3:17-18)". Our passage from rabbinic literature also likens Torah to a tree:

Why are the words of Torah likened to a tree... This is to teach you, just as a small tree may set on fire a bigger tree so too it is with scholars, the younger sharpen the minds of the older. This will be in agreement with what Rabbi Hanina said: I have learnt much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, but from my disciples more than from them all. (B. Taanit 7a)

A mighty tree grows from the smallest seed and great insights begin with small experiences. The passage from health to sickness and back, God willing, to health may seem insignificant to those who do not experience it. Yet, it can be earthshaking, one might say soulshaking, for the one undergoing the process and can lead, hopefully, to greater enlightenment and empathy.

Where is the goodness, the meaning, for us in our journey through sickness? Well, it may come in a cure. When you talk with people who've been sick and recovered or had their first operation and come away utterly cured, they appear very much as if they'd been let out of prison. Then there are people for whom the suffering is only going to get worse, who yet still manage to accept the joys of life they still have with gratitude. There are those, too, who are embittered, who feel so cut off from the self that they used to know that death comes as a blessing to them. And there are some incredible people who accept that what they have is what they are going to have and continue living with joy.

It is when we accept the lessons of our journey that we can reach true communion with God. Sickness, pain, hardship are great teachers. Would that all of us reach the seventh level of heaven and a point of elevation so great that we don't need them to teach us to reach out to those who suffer. For every single person we know has some pain, some hurt, whether it be physical, emotional, intellectual or spiritual. And our journey through heaven, through illness, can help us reach out to any other suffering human begin and say, "I know you hurt. You are not alone." And sometimes that's all it takes to help the healing begin.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you have a verse you say over and over again? If so (or if you did) what might that verse be? Why did you choose it?
2. To what other substances might you liken Torah? How and why?
3. Are there other conclusions to the "story of sickness"? What are they?