

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 14, 2005 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

DON'T LET LOW SELF-ESTEEM STOP YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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As we near Passover I thought I'd bring you a Talmudic passage that makes my "Best 10" list. (I can't believe I haven't brought it to you before!)

At the end of days, there will be a great banquet. The custom at all meals is for the host to say the benediction before the meal and for the greatest person present to lead the Grace after meals. Note that this was said over a glass of wine. We have just a small vestige of this practice in the seder, i.e., the third cup of wine.

The Holy One, blessed be He, will make a great banquet for the righteous on the day He manifests His love to the seed of Isaac.

After they have eaten and drunk, the cup of Grace will be offered to our father Abraham, that he should recite Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace, because Ishmael issued from me.

Then Isaac will be asked: Take it and say Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace because Esau issued from me.

Then Jacob will be asked: Take it and say Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace because I married two sisters during [both] their lifetimes, whereas the Torah was destined to forbid them to me.

Then Moses will be asked: Take it and say Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace because I was not privileged to enter Eretz Yisrael either in life or in death.

Then Joshua will be asked: Take it and say Grace, but he will answer them: I cannot say Grace because I was not privileged to have a son...

Then David will be asked: Take it and say Grace. He will answer them: I will say Grace, and it is fitting for me to say Grace, as it is said: "I will lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.(Psalm 116:13)" (B. Pesachim 119b)

Of all the people to end up leading Grace, surely David is not the least sinful or most holy of this group. But the others lack sufficient self-esteem and so rob themselves of this chance for holiness.

It's a tricky business, balancing being over-anxious to accept honors on the one hand and being too shy to accept them on the other. The sages were familiar with the problem:

If one is asked to pass before the Ark, he ought to refuse, and if he does not refuse he resembles a dish without salt; but if he persists too much in refusing he resembles a dish which is over-salted.

How should he act? The first time he should refuse; the second time he should hesitate; the third time he should stretch out his legs and go down.

Our Rabbis taught: There are three things of which one may easily have too much while a little is good, namely, yeast, salt, and refusal. (B. Berachot 18a)

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever declined an honor because you lacked the confidence or thought yourself unworthy? Will you change your behavior now that you know what the sages thought about this issue?
2. How could someone like Abraham lack the confidence and David (adulterer, arranger of murders, etc.) feel entitled to take the honor? Where is the healthy balance of humility and proper self-esteem? Is grandiosity just low self-esteem flipped?

Enjoy your sedarim!