

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted April 23, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

I KNEW BEN AZZAI, BEN AZZAI WAS A FRIEND OF MINE. RABBI, YOU ARE NO BEN AZZAI: THE YERUSHALMI'S SMACK DOWN

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The title of this study passage comes from the 1988 vice presidential debate in which Senator Dan Quayle, the Republican nominee, said, "I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency. I will be prepared to deal with the people in the Bush administration, if that unfortunate event would ever occur."

In reply, Senator Bentsen said, "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy."

We have much the same thing going on our study passage: Rabbi Yochanan compares himself with Ben Azzai and is quickly informed that he's no Ben Azzai. (Our passage comes from tractate Bikkurim, which deals with Shavuot and first fruits.)

Rabbi Yochanan went to one place and said: I am the Ben Azzai of this place (i.e., you can come and ask me any question; play "stump the rabbi" as it were). An old man asks a very complicated question and disproves Rabbi Yochanan's answer after which he says: There goes the Ben Azzai of this town! (Y. Bikkurim 2:2)

Rabbi Yochanan is not the only sage who compares himself with Ben Azzai this way: both Rav and Abaye fall into the same trap. (See the parallels B. Kiddushin 20a// Y. Peah 6:3//Y. Sotah 9:2// B. Eruvin 29a//B. Kiddushin 20a//B. Arachin 30b//B. Sotah 45b.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Is the "old man" Elijah or is it Rabbi Yochanan saying it to himself? Or is the old man just someone who knows more than Rabbi Yochanan?
2. Hillel is depicted as coming to town and declaring himself an expert and promptly being shot down (T. Pesachim 4:11..and see Rabbi Louis Reiser's article on this incident, <http://www.maqom.com/journal/paper19.pdf>). Is this a standard motif? If so, what does it tell us about the

people's regard for visiting sages?

3. Why do the sages compare themselves with Ben Azzai? Can you think of more likely comparisons they might make (e.g., Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Akiba)? Could it have something to do with the fact that Ben Azzai is one of the four sages who entered Paradise (T. Hagigah 2:3, Ben Azzai dies)?
4. The Yerushalmi, as we have learned is the Talmud of Rabbi Yochanan to a great extent. Therefore, it's interesting that we have this story which takes him down a peg. Why do you think this is? How do you think it made it through the editing process?

Happy Omer Counting!