

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 24, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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BH

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

What is a community? Is it houses, buildings, a zip code, an area code? Or is it the relationships of people who live in proximity to one another that makes a community. We begin with the mishnah which answers our question concretely, as is its wont. A community is made up of people living together who have mutual obligations to maintain their physical environment.

They make one [who lives in a courtyard help financially] to build a gate house and door for the courtyard. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Not every courtyard is fit [to have a] gatehouse. They make one [who lives in] a city [help financially] to build a wall [around the city], doors [in that wall] and a bolt [in the door]. Rabban Shimon ben Gamilel says: Not all cities are fit for walls. How [long must one] live in a city to be considered one of the people of the city? Twelve months. [If one] bought in [that city] a home, behold he is considered a person of that city [from that moment on]. (M. Baba Batra 1:5)

We can liken this to the fees one pays when one lives in a condo. One pays so that the grass may be cut, security provided and so forth. The Gemara takes this concrete depiction of a community and transforms it into a spiritual definition. Community is not about buildings. It is about relationships and caring for those in our midst who need the most help. Community is about giving charity (tsedakah).

Rabbi Elazar said that Rabbi Yose [said]: All the righteousness [tsedakah] and loving kindness [chesed] that Jews do in this world causes great peace and great advocates between the Jewish people and their Father in heaven. (B. Baba Batra 10a)

It was taught [in a baraita]: Rabbi Yehuda says: great is charity for it brings salvation nearerŠHe [also] used to say: ten things were created in the world.

Rock is hard but iron cuts it.

Iron is hard, but fire softens it.

Fire is hard, but water puts it out.

Water is hard, but clouds carry it.

Clouds are strong, but wind disperses them.

Wind is strong, but body bears it.

[One's] body is strong, but fright breaks it.

Fright is strong, but wine banishes it.

Wine is strong, but sleep works it off.

Death is stronger than all [of them], but charity saves [one] from death, as it is written, "Tsedakah saves [one] from death. (Proverbs 10:2)" (B. Baba Batra 10a)

So, in the Gemara, it is charity, the value of every human soul, which describes a community.

Discussion Questions:

1. So what does the Gemara say a community is? How do we make the leap from the concreteness of the mishnah to the system of righteousness where people give willingly, as opposed to being forced, to make the most of the place where they live?
2. If you were describing a community's boundaries, its requirements for membership, what would you say?