

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted May 7, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

CHARITY AND DEALING WITH THE CHIEF OF THE SPIRITS IN THE YERUSHALMI

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The end of tractate Peah has some wonderful material on karma and charity. (The ends of most tractates tend to have great content but the end of Peah is truly exceptional.) Here are just three stories from this passage.

Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi and Rabbi Yitschak bar Nachman were in charge of giving out the charity money for the community. They would give Rabbi Oshaya's father, Rabbi Chama, a dinar, and he would give it to others.

Everyone would gossip about Rabbi Zecharyah, Rabbi Levi's son-in-law. They said that he didn't need charity but was taking communal charity funds. When he died, they checked and found out that he would give away this money to others who were in need.

Rabbu Chinena bar Pappa was one of the charity distributors, and he would give the money away at night. One time the chief of the spirits met him and said to him: Did the rabbi not teach us, "Do not move the boundary of your neighbor (Deuteronomy 19:14)?" [That is, the spirit is saying, "You are infringing on my space!"] Said Rabbi Chinena to him: But it is also written, "A gift in secret overturns anger. (Proverbs 21:14)" The spirit gave up and ran away from the sage. (Y. Peah 8:8)

Discussion Questions:

1. Our first two passages are typical rabbinic stories about the righteousness of the sages. The second story is especially important in that it warns us not to judge others when they receive charity. Are you aware of people these days who are receiving charity, who have perhaps never had need of it before? How can we help people overcome the real feelings of shame they have upon taking charity for what may be the first time in their lives?
2. The third story may have surprised you. Not only are there spirits of the night, they have a boss. This boss was sent to deal with this troublesome rabbi who was infringing on their turf. The night, it is implied, is a time for mischief and sin, not charity. This boss even knows his Torah, but the sage wins the "proof-text duel". How do you imagine the talk among the spirits went before the chief went to this meeting? Why do you think the sages believed in a hierarchy of spirits? If they believed the night had a host of spirits, what other spheres might have such spirits?