

Nature or Nurture the Sages' Way

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We would all like to think of the sages as saintly people. And, indeed, some of them were. But even the most saintly among them had their prejudices against certain groups. Let's take a look and see if we can make sense of their biases:

A person should not teach his son to be a donkey driver, a camel driver, a sailor, a potter, a teamster, a shepherd or a grocer, since their occupations are those of robbers.

Abba Orion from Tsaydan says in the name of Abba Shaul:

“Most donkey drivers are bad (because they hit the animals).
Most camel drivers are OK (because the animals move of their own accord and don't have to be struck to do so).
Most sailors are pious (Chassidim) (because they pray often out of fear of storms).
Most bastards are intelligent.
Most slaves are beautiful.
Most slaves look like their mother's brothers.
The best of the physicians go to Gehinnom (on account of the patients they did not save).
The best of the butchers are connected to Amalek (because they are professional killers)...
The best of the women are magic makers.
Happy is the one who does the will of God.” (Y. Kiddushin 4:11)

The sages have very definite ideas about the people who practice various professions. It's a strange list in that some of the professions on the list seem to be intrinsically good or evil people while others are shaped by their work to become better or worse persons. And then there are some really unexpected twists in the bunch: being a doctor is the path to hell and most bastards are smart.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it right to judge a group of people according to their profession? We tend to make generalizations about people as an efficient way to sort facts into manageable categories. With these lists are the sages saying this is legitimate? Or are they saying that things are rarely as they appear?
2. Well, we have to deal with the “women are sorceresses” problem. Could it be that women had a whole set of wisdom of which the sages were ignorant, therefore deeming it magic? Or, it must be asked, “Did they just not like women?”
3. Finally, what do you make of the summation of the whole sugya? It seems to contradict everything that went before. It's saying that one's profession or gender is irrelevant. The only way to true happiness is to find out what God wants you to do with your life and do it. It says, don't be defined, even by the sages' wisdom; that righteous people can be found in every walk of life. Do you agree? Have you found your bliss? Tell us if you have and how you knew you had found it.

As always, looking forward to your answers and insights!