

Talmud Passage of the Week

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 06/10/96).

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"Guerilla Repentance"

Dear Friends,

Greetings! As our drought wears on and on here in Texas, this passage is gaining more and more relevance. We continue learning about how to pray before God when we are desperate and who our best representatives might be to plead our case.

We will continue learning on our regular schedule throughout the Summer. Enjoy!

Bavli Ta'anit 16a, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 18-20:

"The elder among them says before them words of admonition."

Our Rabbis taught: "If there is an elder, the elder speaks. And if not, a Sage speaks. And if not, a man of [imposing] appearance speaks."

But is the elder whom we mentioned [chosen] even if he is not a Sage? Abaye said: He says thus: If there is an elder who is [also] a Sage, the elder who is a Sage speaks. And if not, a Sage speaks. And if not, a man of [imposing] appearance speaks.

[What does this person say?] "Our brothers, neither sackcloth nor fasting are effective. Rather, repentance and good deeds are effective. For so we found regarding the people of Ninveh that it is not said about them, 'And God sw their sackcloth and their fast,' but rather, 'And God saw their deeds, that they had returned from their evil way.'"

[The King of Ninveh said,] "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. (Jonah 3:10)" What did they do? They tied the animals separately and the young separately. They said before Him: "Master of the Universe! If you do not have mercy on us, we will not have mercy on these!"

[The King of Ninveh said,] "And let them cry mightily to God. (Jonah 3:8)" What did they say? They said before Him: "Master of the Universe! A submissive man and a man who is not submissive, a righteous man and a wicked man, who yields to whom?"

"And let them turn every one from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands. (Jonah 3:8)" What is [meant by] "and from the violence that is in their hands"?

Shmuel said: Even if he stole a beam and built it into a building, he must pull down the entire building and

restore the beam to its owner.

Background

The Sage v. The Elder

Our passage begins with a (to our minds) astonishing statement: an elder outranks a sage? Couldn't be! And, indeed, Abaye comes in and neatly corrects this "mistake". We are so conditioned to seeing things through the sages' eyes that we accept Abaye's explanation. Nonetheless, the baraita, as it stands, indicates that an elder outranked a sage.

Rabbi Abrams' "Quick and Dirty" Rules of Spotting Aramaic

The section italicized above is an interruption of the baraita. The baraita is in Hebrew (which generally represents an earlier layer of the text) while the insertion is in Aramaic (generally, a later layer of the text). How would you know the difference between Hebrew and Aramaic?

- a. You understand Hebrew but you can't understand these words, written in Hebrew characters.
- b. Even if you don't understand Hebrew but you can recognize Hebrew letters, and you see that more than two words in a sentence end in the letter aleph. This is a really "quick and dirty" rule which doesn't apply here but holds true in many cases. For reasons I won't go into now, Aramaic has many more words that end in the letter aleph than does Hebrew.

Why do you want to be able to spot Aramaic? Because it will help you discern the different layers in the text and that is important for your increased understanding.

The People of Ninveh

It may help to see the passage which is the basis for all these expositions.

And the tidings reached the king of Ninveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him and covered it with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Ninveh by the decree of the king and his nobles saying, "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water, but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast; and let them cry mightily unto God. Yeah, let them turn every one from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows whether God will not turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?" And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, which He said He would do unto them and He did it not. (Jonah 3:6-10)

There are a number of odd things in the king's proclamation. Why are the flocks in sackcloth? What does it mean to cry mightily? And what exactly does it mean to get rid of violence in your hands? These are the questions the expositions in the Talmud passage answers.

The Stolen Beam

The returning of the stolen beam is most surprising because in M. Gittin 5:5 // M. Eduyot 7:9 we learn specifically that one is allowed to pay the price of the stolen beam rather than returning the beam itself. This ruling was instituted in the sure knowledge of human nature that if one had to tear down one's house to return a stolen beam, rather than simply making monetary compensation for it, precious few persons would be likely to return the stolen property.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the different qualities that an elder, a sage and a person of imposing appearance might have? What are the different ways each might rebuke the congregation? Do you agree with Abaye's interpretation? What are the special qualities of someone who is both an elder and a sage as opposed to one who is only a sage? Would you have been able to tell that the section, presented in italics above, was a later insertion, even if it had not been italicized?
2. The behavior of the people of Ninveh might be described as "guerilla repentance". They make the animals their hostages, as it were. (Alternatively, they are likening themselves to these poor, dumb animals and trying to elicit God's mercy.) They also appeal to the ways of the world. In the world, the unsubmissive and evil usually dominate the submissive and righteous ones. God is considered the righteous and submissive one here. These tactics work? How

could we use "guerilla tactics" today? Have you ever prayed in desperation? How much were you willing to argue your case before God? Do you find it surprising that the biblical text shows the people of Ninveh as quite submissive while the midrash portrays them as being quite aggressive? What do you think this means?

3. How far would you go to make a sin of yours right? Would you tear out, so to speak, whatever you had built on top of that sin? Or would you leave the sin in place and try to atone in other ways?

[*Return to MAQOM homepage*](#)