

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

TEIKU: SEEING ALL SIDES OF AN ISSUE

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One characteristic of the Babylonian Talmud that sets it apart from all other works of rabbinic literature is the use of the word "teiku" which is short form of the Aramaic word teikum meaning, "let it stand". There are some 300 uses of this word in the Bavli but none in the Mishnah, Tosefta or Yerushalmi (the Talmud of the Land of Israel).

When a piece of Talmud ends with this word it means that no answer has been arrived at and that the question should stand forever...or at least until Elijah comes. (There is a folk etymology of the word teiku that holds that the word is an acronym for the following: Elijah (the Tishbite) will settle (Yitareits) hard questions (kushiyot) and problems (Va'avayot). Reflecting the power of this ancient word, the modern Hebrew noun for a tie at the end of a game is called teiku.

Passages that use the word teiku are very late constructs of the Babylonian Talmud. They are designed to let the learner see as many sides of an issue as possible rather than coming up with a practical decision about what one should do.

This passage contains the first use of this word in the Bavli:

What is the meaning of the verse: "And they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed? (Isaiah 1:28)"? This refers to people who leave the [the synagogue while the] Torah scroll [is being read].

Rabbi Abbahu used to go out between one reader and the next [when one portion was finished and before the next was begun].

Rav Pappa raised the question: What of going out between verse and verse? It remains unanswered (teiku). (B. Berachot 8a)

The topic under discussion is whether it is permissible to go out of the sanctuary while the Torah is being read and, as you can see, in the Talmud text itself nothing is decided.

Discussion Questions:

1. The text here offers no "take home" as to whether one can leave the sanctuary during the Torah service or at what points in the Torah reading one may do so. What do you learn from this without any "bottom line", so to speak, to be put into action?
2. One of the biggest hurdles to understanding Talmud is to recognize that this is not a bunch of guys in one room having a conversation. Rabbi Abbahu is a sage of Israel from 290-320, Rav Pappa is a Babylonian sage from the years 350-375. How does this insight change your ideas about reading Talmud? How would this passage read if you took out Rav Pappa's question? So why is Rav Pappa's question included?