

Talmud Passage of the Week

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 06/24/96).

Those of you who are following along with us regularly and want to read just the newly posted Talmudic passages can set a bookmark to this page to directly access the new material. You can also find our material on AOL.

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

"We Are Unworthy!"

Dear Friends,

Our passage this week outlines the characteristics a good prayer leader must have according to the Talmud. Talk about intimidating! Wait until you see the criteria a ba'al tefillah (one who leads worship) must live up to.

This is an example of a phenomenon we frequently find in Talmud: the sages legislate the "floor", that is, the minimum that everyone must do, but then describe the "ceiling" to which everyone might aspire. Here, that contrast is set up by comparing how anyone can achieve repentance ("merely" give up sin) and how one might pray for a whole community so that it might give up sin (be exceedingly pious and knowledgeable). All of us can give up sin. But not all of us will be able to live up to the sages' descriptions of an ideal prayer leader. Nonetheless, it's inspiring to know what their "gold standard" is and to see how close we can come to making the grade!

Enjoy!

Bavli Ta'anit 16a, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 20-22:

Rav Adda bar Ahavah said: A person who has a transgression in his hand and he confesses but does not retract from it, to what may he be compared? To a person who holds a *sherets* in his hand, for even if he immerses himself in all the waters in the world, the immersion does not count for him.

[But] if he casts it from his hand, once he has immersed himself in forty *se'ahs* the immersion immediately counts for him, as it is said, "But whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)" And it says, "Let us lift up our hearts with our hands to God in the heavens. (Lamentations 3:41)"

"They stand up in prayer. They send down before the ark an elder, etc." Our Rabbis taught: They stand up in prayer. Even though there is there an elder who is a sage, they only send down before the ark a person who is well versed [in the prayers].

Rabbi Yehudah says: One who has dependents but no [money] and has labor in the field but his house is empty and whose youth was becoming, and is humble and is acceptable to the people, and has a tune, and whose voice is pleasant and who is expert in reading the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings and in studying Midrash, Halakhot [laws] and Aggadot [stories] and who is expert in all the blessings. And the Rabbis set their eyes on Rav Yitshak bar Ammi.

Background

The Mikveh, The Sherets And The Forty Se'ahs of Water

These are all terms which relate to ritual purity. The mikveh is the Jewish ritual bath used to cleanse a person of ritual impurity. A sherets is a "creepy crawly": weasel, mouse, toad, hedgehog, chameleon, lizard, snail or mole. Their carcasses convey ritual impurity when touched (Leviticus 11:29-30). Forty se'ahs is the minimum amount of water a mikveh must have and is considered to be either 87 or 151 gallons. So this teaching shows the absurdity of a person getting into a mikveh holding on to a sherets. It is the embodiment of self-deception.

The Proof Texts

Why do we need these two prooftexts? They both underscore the need to confess and distance oneself from sin. The first part of the verse from Proverbs makes this clearer:

He that covers his transgressions shall not prosper. But whoever confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

It is not enough to confess sin, one must forsake it, too, to obtain mercy. Likewise, a bit of context helps us understand the verse from Lamentations:

Let us search and try our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens. (Lamentations 3:40-41)

One must not only raise one's hands in prayer to God to get rid of sin, one must turn with one's heart and rid oneself of the sin that is in one's hands.

Who is Fit to Lead Prayer?

We see, again, the tension between wanting to honor a sage, who is identified with an elder, and recognizing that the one who should lead prayer is one with appropriate affect and suitable talent (he can sing and knows the blessings). Not only that, the person may not even have sinned in his youth! This is the meaning of "whose youth was becoming". A prayer leader not only was not allowed to inhale, but he should never have been near such a thing in the first place. This is an extraordinarily high standard to which a prayer leader must aspire. One must have lived according to the maxim of my teacher, Professor Jonathan Sarna, "Never do or say anything that you'd mind having on the front page of the New York Times."

Discussion Questions

1. Look at the two prooftexts again. Proverbs is an example of Wisdom Literature (more examples in the Tanach are some of the Psalms and the books of Ecclesiastes and Job) while Lamentations was composed to mourn the destruction of the First Temple. Wisdom Literature may be seen as the precursor of the sages while Lamentations may be related to the Priestly tradition. This may be particularly true in this prooftext in which the verse speaks of raising the hands, just as the priests raised their hands in blessing the congregation. Do you think this might be part of the reason we have two prooftexts here? To represent two constituencies (priests and sages)? Or do you see some other dynamic at work here? What is it?
2. The elder/sage admonishes the people but does not necessarily lead them in prayer. This ruling is implicitly modified by Rabbi Yehudah who states that the person who leads the prayer ought to have the personal situation that will lead to the greatest intention (his home situation), skills in prayer *and* the knowledge of a sage. Rabbi Yehudah's view is actually taken as the recommendation for practical "prayer leader searches" (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim 579:1). Have you ever known a prayer leader with these qualities? Is it fair and reasonable to disqualify a possible prayer leader because of something he or she did in his adolescence?
3. Have you ever tried to "pull one over" on God and/or people? Have you ever tried to go through the motions of atonement and hold on to your sin at the same time? What happened? Were you caught? Did you ever truly let go of

the sin?

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