

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted June 19, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

### **KOL ISHAH: WOMEN'S VOICES IN PRAYER**

**© Judith Z. Abrams, 2003**

Several years ago, I was asked to teach a class about the role of a woman's voices in prayer and why it was banished. Though I had not come across this issue before, I imagined I had just missed it. So I started doing some research, the results of which you'll find below. This is truly one of those issues that is a "mountain hanging on a thread".

First of all, there is Scriptural and rabbinic proof of women's expertise at praying. So, for example, we have this passage from Nehemiah that clearly implies that women were part of the singing and noise-making:

And the singers sang loud...And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced. For God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women also and the children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar off. (Nehemiah 12:42-43)

In addition, of all the personalities in Hebrew Scripture, the sages chose Hannah to be the exemplar of proper prayer:

#### **Hannah as an Exemplar of Correct Prayer**

R. Hamnuna said: How many most important laws can be learnt from these verses relating to Hannah! "Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart. (I Samuel 1:10 ff)": from this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart. "Only her lips moved": from this we learn that he who prays must frame the words distinctly with his lips. "But her voice could not be heard": from this, it is forbidden to raise one's voice in the Tefillah. "Therefore Eli thought she had been drunken": from this, that a drunken person is forbidden to say the Tefillah. "And Eli said unto her, How long will you be drunken, etc.": R. Eleazar said: From this we learn that one who sees in his neighbor something unseemly must reprove him. "And Hannah answered and said, No my lord." Ulla, or some say R. Yose b. Hanina, said: She said to him: You are no lord in this matter, nor does the holy spirit rest on you, that you suspect me of this thing. Some say, She said to him: You are no lord, [meaning] the Shekhinah and the holy spirit is not with you in that you take the harsher and not the more lenient view of my conduct. Do you not know that "I am a woman of sorrowful spirit: I have neither drunk wine nor strong drink." R. Eleazar said: From this we learn that one who is suspected wrongfully must clear himself. (B. Berachot 31a-b)

#### **Women's Voices Are Important for Proper Mourning**

Women may raise a wail during the festival [week] but not clap [their hands in grief]; R. Ishmael says, those that are close to the bier clap [their hands in grief]. On the days of the New Moon, of Hanukkah and of Purim they may raise a wail and clap [their hands in grief]. Neither on the former (i.e., the festival week) nor on the latter occasions do they chant a dirge. After [the dead] has been interred they neither raise a wail nor clap [their hands in grief]. What is meant by "raising a wail"? What all sing in unison. What is meant by a dirge? When one leads and all respond after her. As it is said: And teach your daughters wailing and one another [each] lamentation (Jeremiah 9:19). But as the future [days] to come, [the prophet] says: "He will destroy death for ever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces. (Isaiah 25:8)" (M. Moed Katan 3:9)

The Soncino Talmud has a beautiful translation of one of the "lament" songs and it is appended to the end of this post.

If women were shown in the Tanach as exemplars of prayers and ritual singers then how did we end up with the situation we have today where women are certainly not heard and often not seen in some synagogues?

We have to look into rabbinic literature to find the answer. It lies in this passage:

### **Women's Voices Detrimental to Kavvanah**

R. Isaac said: A handbreadth [exposed] in a [married] woman constitutes sexual incitement. In which way? Shall I say, if one gazes at it? But has not Rav Sheshet [already] said: Why did Scripture enumerate the ornaments worn outside the clothes with those worn inside? To tell you that if one gazes at the little finger of a woman it is as if he gazed at her secret place! No, it means in one's own wife, and when he recites the Shema.

Rav Hisda: A woman's leg is a sexual incitement, as it says, "Uncover the leg, pass through the rivers (Isaiah 47:2)" and it says afterwards, "Your nakedness shall be uncovered, yea, your shame shall be seen. (Isaiah 47:3)"

Samuel said: A woman's voice is a sexual incitement, as it says, "For sweet is your voice and your countenance is comely. (Song of Songs 2:14)"

Rav Sheshet said: A woman's hair is a sexual incitement, as it says, "Your hair is as a flock of goats. (Song of Songs 4:1)" (B. Berachot 24a//B. Kiddushin 70a//Y. Hallah 2:1; Samuel's saying)

Because of the construction of the passage, the voice, hair, legs, etc. were all seen as distraction from true prayer and they had to go. Shmuel's statement about women's voices occurs only 3 times in all of rabbinic literature and each of those three times it is simply a reference to the statement we find here in the Bavli.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Is a woman's voice an enticement for sex? If this is so what would be the fairest way of accommodating everyone in the congregation?
2. General rulings are not usually made based on one person's opinion. That didn't happen here. Why do you think not?
3. I was amazed that something that I had thought was so crucial to Judaism was treated so briefly in the texts. Is it worth going back to see whether some other "holy truths" are based on such weak textual foundations? If so, what other issues would you like to explore?
4. What sorts of decorum ruin the prayer experience for you? How could you ameliorate your situation?

---

What say the women [in lament]? Said Rav: "Cry woe o'er him that is now departing! Cry woe o'er his wounds [and smarting]"

Rava said, the women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Cry woe o'er him that is parting

Cry woe o'er his wounds and smarting!

Rava also said, the women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Withdraw the bone from out the pot

And the kettles fill with water [hot].

Rava said also: The women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Be muffled ye high mountains,

[Clouds] covering your head;

Of high lineage and grand ancestry

Came he that is dead.

Also this said Rava: The women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Borrow [and buy] a Milesian robe

To dress a free-born son;

[Give it free of charge] for

Provision left he none.

And said Rava: The women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Comes hurrying and scurrying

Tumbling aboard the ferry

And having to borrow his fare.

And said Rava: The women of Shchantsiv say thus:

Our brothers are merchants who

At the custom houses are searched

And said Rava: The women of Shchantsiv say thus:

This death or that death [is the end of the quest]:

Our bruises are the rate of interest. (B. Moed Katan 28b)