

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted June 21, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

BH

CHARITY AND DEEDS OF LOVING KINDNESS

We begin our discussion of the difference between charity and deeds of loving kindness with a collection of memrot. A memra is, according to Abraham Weiss, "a short Amoraic statement which contains a complete idea, without any dialectics.(p. 95)" In this collection of memrot, we have four statements by Rabbi Elazar about charity and deeds of lovingkindness. Into this string of memrot has been inserted a baraita. (Whenever a sentence begins, "Our Rabbis taught" it signals that the text that follows will be a baraita, i.e., an outside source that was not included in the mishnah but originated from the years when the Mishnah was being composed, i.e., 70-200 C.E.).

Said Rabbi Elazar: Greater is the one who performs charity than [one who offers] all the sacrifices, for it is said, "To do charity and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. (Proverbs 21:3)."

And said Rabbi Elazar: Deeds of loving kindness (gemilut chasadim) are [greater] than charity for it is said, "Sow to yourselves according to your charity (tsedakah), and reap according to your kindness (chesed). (Hosea 10:12)" If a person sows, there is doubt as to whether he will eat [the harvest] or not, [but when] a person reaps, he will certainly eat.

And said Rabbi Elazar: Tsedakah is repaid only according to the kindness (chesed) in it, as it is said, "Sow to yourselves according to charity and reap according to your kindness. (Hoseah 10:12)"

Our Rabbis taught: In three ways is loving kindness (gemilut chasadim) superior to charity (tsedakah). Charity [can only be done] with one's money [but] acts of loving kindness can be done with one's person and one's money. Charity [can only be given] to the poor. Deeds of loving kindness can be performed for both the rich and the poor. Charity [can only be given] to the living. Deeds of loving kindness can be done for both the living and the dead.

And said Rabbi Elazar: Anyone who does charity and justice, it is as if he had filled all the world with kindness (chesed) for it is said, "He loves charity and justice, the earth is full of the loving kindness of the

Lord. (Psalm 33:5)" And lest you say that whoever wishes to do good succeeds [in finding the opportunity to do so], Scripture says, "How precious [or, rare] is Your lovingkindness, O God, etc. (Psalm 36:8)" One might say that [this verse also applies] to one who fears Heaven, [so] Scripture says, "But the loving kindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him. (Psalm 103:17)" (B. Sukkah 49b-50a)

This collection of memrot seems quite straightforward. Rabbi Elazar outlines his ideas as to why charity outranks sacrifices and deeds of loving kindness outrank charity. The baraita calls attention to the differences between charity and deeds of lovingkindness, making it clear that the Rabbis, too, considered deeds of lovingkindness greater than charity.

This passage could have been placed in many other places in the Talmud than in tractate Sukkah. For example, it could have gone in the general discussion of collection and distribution of charity in Baba Batra 8b. However, the sages put this passage into the commentary to the following mishnah:

How was the water libation [i.e., the act of pouring out liquid as a sacrifice, done]? A gold flask with a wide belly and a narrow neck, holding three logs [about 3 gallons] was filled from the pool of Shiloach. [When] they reached the Water Gate, they sounded tekiah, teruah and tekiah. [The priest then] went up the [the altar's] ramp and turned to his left and there were two silver bowls there. Rabbi Yehudah says: They were [made of] of plaster. Rather, their surfaces had become dark because of the wine [contained within them]. And they had each a hole like a narrow snout, one [hole] wide and the other narrow so that would both be emptied at the same time. The one on the west was for water and the one on the east for wine. If one emptied out the flask of water into the bowl for wine, or that of wine into that for water, he has fulfilled [his obligation]. Rabbi Yehudah says: with one log he made the libation offering all eight days [of Sukkot and Shemini Atseret]. And to the one who performs the libation they say: Raise your hand! For one time, a certain priest poured out the water over his feet and all the people pelted him with their etrogs. (M. Sukkah 4:9)

First, we have to understand what the water libation meant to people before we can perceive its link with acts of loving kindness. In ancient Israel, rain was seen as God's gift to the earth. Rain does not fall in Israel until after Sukkot and so Sukkot is the time when prayers for rain begin. (They end at Pesach.) This pouring out of water and wine was meant to metaphorically convey God's bounty as God would pour out water on the land and make the grape vines flourish. Giving the people rain is God's act of loving kindness for everyone benefits from it; the rich and the poor alike. And if rain is withheld, it is seen as a punishment upon the people for their misdeeds. Indeed, they must fast and atone if the rain does not fall.

So what does the juxtaposition of this collection of memrot with this mishnah tell us? That in doing deeds of loving kindness we are providing the source of life. Just as the world cannot survive without rain, society cannot survive without deeds of loving kindness. And if we want to merit rain, we must start by pouring out love, just as the priest begins by pouring out water and wine.

And what happens if we do not follow this teaching? Well, once a priest, identified by Josephus (Antiquities 13: 13, 5) as Alexander Yannai, the king and High Priest of Israel from 107-76 B.C.E., was apparently from the group of Jews called the Sadducees which did not believe this ritual was of great importance as did the rival group, the Pharisees. His contempt brought an immediate, dramatic response: the people threw their etrogs at him. So this ritual, and its proper performance held great importance for Israelites in general, not just the priesthood. The reminder to perform it correctly may also be linked to our collection of memrot. The Sadducees tended to be wealthier and stricter than the Pharisees and, thus, might not have felt the need for charity and loving kindness as much as their poorer co-religionists.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does God show communities lovingkindness and charity? Especially, how do you think the Gemara would answer that question?

2. How do you feel about the priority of deeds of lovingkindness over financial philanthropy? Is there a place for both? In what measure should each be practiced? Indeed, might some who are gifted in one way concentrate on one sort of mitzvah? For example, let us say that one has a special gift for visiting the sick and helping them get meals and talk about what's going on. If God has given you a gift like this, should you concentrate on this aspect of the mitzvah? Or, if you have money and take delight in giving it away should you concentrate on that mitzvah?