

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted July 2, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

"MR. FIVE SINS" AND HIS ANSWERED PRAYERS IN THE YERUSHALMI © Judith Z. Abrams, 2009

We are now in that part of the Jewish year when those in Israel look longingly to the sky for a hint of rain. (Indeed, those of us suffering through a record heat wave here in Texas are looking longingly to the sky, as well.) Tractate Taanit is the one concerned with precisely this issue. In the sages' minds, if someone prays for rain and rain comes, it is a sign that the person who's praying is very righteous, indeed. (In the Bavli, many very great sages pray for rain and their prayers are not answered.) It is in this context that we find the following story: Rabbi Abbahu dreamt that "Mr. Five Sins" prayed that rain would come, and it did come.

Rabbi Abbahu summoned him and asked him: What is your trade? He said to him: I do five sins every day: hiring prostitutes, cleaning up the theater, bring home their garments for washing, dancing and banging cymbals before them. Rabbi Abbahu asked: What good deed have you done? He said: One day I was cleaning the theater and a woman came and stood behind a pillar and cried. I said to her: What's the matter? She said: My husband is in prison and I wanted to see what I can do to free him. So I sold my bed and cover and gave the proceeds to her. I said: Here is your money: free your husband, but do not sin. Rabbi Abbahu said to him: You are worthy of praying having your prayers answered. (Y. Taanit 1:4)

Discussion Questions:

This is part of a long series of stories of people whose prayers for rain are answered, even though they seem the unlikeliest of candidates to be righteous enough to have their prayers answered. "Mr. Five Sins" is clearly not just surrounded by a sinful environment, he promotes it and participates in it. But he saves this woman from falling into this environment. One has the impression that she is hesitating at the door of the theater, stealing herself to walk in and sign up as a prostitute in a last ditch effort to buy her husband's freedom.

1. Given this scenario, what is it that is so righteous in what he does that overrides his overwhelmingly sinful lifestyle? How can we model ourselves on the righteousness of this man, not his lifestyle, but his ability to save someone from slipping over the edge into the abyss?
2. There are other instances in rabbinic literature of sinful people who do one righteous person and that earns them eternity in the world to come. Can you count on the opportunity to do that one shining deed? Is that possibility always there and we just don't see it?