

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted July 15, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

HOW TO COPE WITH UNCERTAINTY: A FAMOUS SAYING THAT ISN'T IN THE YERUSHALMI

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While it is obviously important to study what is in the Yerushalmi, it can occasionally be just as important to study what is not in it. The saying I want to examine is a famous one:

All beginnings are hard. (Mekhilta Yitro Bachodesh 2, on v'ata im shamo'a tishma b'koli)

Not only is the phrase not found in the Yerushalmi, it is found nowhere else in all of rabbinic literature.

Why is this so important for us today? Because many of us are facing uncertainty and new beginnings due to the economic upheavals that are shaking many of us to our very foundations.

The fact that this saying occurs only once suggests to me that the sages did not find beginnings all that hard. In fact, centuries of Jewish life have given us the "cultural DNA" to deal with new beginnings that often come suddenly.

For example, Rambam moved from place to place, driven by persecution. He suffered the death of his brother, who was his primary financial supporter and fell into a clinical depression. It was after this that he wrote his greatest works. Joseph Karo (author of the Shulkhan Aruch) moved six times during his lifetime. The Maharam shuttled between France and Germany, spending his last 7 years in prison. (He didn't allow his community to pay his ransom, fearing it would just encourage further kidnappings.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Clearly Jews have had to make the best of all the new beginnings that were either forced on them or that they chose. What characteristics of Judaism and rabbinic literature have helped you deal with change in your lifetime?
2. Pirkei Avot 4:1 suggests that one way to cope with change is to "prime the pump," so to speak. If you want wisdom, learn. If you want strength, practice self control. If you want honor, honor others. And if you want wealth, practice satisfaction. Are there other ways you can "prime the pump" to get what you need? How could you use this basic principle to get health, happiness in relationships, etc.? In other words, when you're in the midst of a change in circumstances, you can control the energy that comes to you by sending out the energy you'd like to receive back.

Bonus:

We are not the only ones who know about the value of "priming the pump," as this song by The Kingston Trio shows.

Desert Pete

Artist: The Kingston Trio, Words and Music by Billy Ed Wheeler

I was travellin' West a buckskin on my way to a cattle run
Cross a little cactus desert under a hot blisterin' sun I was

thirsty down to my toenails, stopped to rest me on a stump But I tell ya I just couldn't believe it when I saw that water pump I took it to be a mirage at first, it'll fool a thirsty man Then I saw a note stuck in a bakin' powder can "This pump is old", the note began, "but she works so give'r a try" "I put a new sucker washer in 'er, you may find the leather dry"

"You've got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe" "You've got to give of yourself 'fore you're worthy to receive" "Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your feet" "Leave the bottle full for others, Thank You kindly, Desert Pete"

"Yeah, you'll have to prime the pump, work that handle like there's a fire" "Under that rock you'll find some water I left in a bitters jar" "Now there's just enough to prime it with so dontcha go drinkin' first" "You just pour it in and pump like mad, buddy, you'll quench your thirst"

"You've got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe" "You've got to give of yourself 'fore you're worthy to receive" "Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your feet" "Leave the bottle full for others, Thank You kindly, Desert Pete"

Well I found that jar and I tell ya nothin' was ever prettier to my eye And I was tempted strong to drink it, cuz that pump looked mighty dry But the note went on "have faith my friend, there's water down below" "You got to give until you get I'm the one who ought to know" So I poured in the jar and I started pumpin' and I heard a beautiful sound Of water bubblin' and splashin' up outta that hole in the ground I took off my shoes and I drunk my fill of that cool refreshing treat I thank the Lord and thank the pump and I thank old Desert Pete

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