

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

SOMETHING SMELLS FISHY: ELIYAHU RABBAH AND ELIYAH ZUTA

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One of the lesser-known midrash collections is called Tanna d'bei Eliyahu-Teachings of Elijah's school. Within that there is an Eliyah Rabbah (The Great Midrash of Elijah) and Eliyah Zuta (The Small Midrash of Elijah). Nu? Why did wasn't all just one midrash collection? The answer is found in the Bavli:

A man brought Rav Anan a basket of small fish. He said to him: What is your business? He said to him: I have a [case for] judgment. He did not accept [it] from him [and said: I am disqualified to judge your case. He said to him: I do not want your judgment but just accept this fish so you don't deprive me of the opportunity of bringing first fruits...This teaches that anyone who brings a gift to a Torah scholar is regarded as if he had brought the first fruit offering. He said to him: I do not want to accept it but now that you've explained your reason I will. Rav Anan sent the man to Rav Nahman with the message: Please judge this man's case for I, Anan, am disqualified to judge him. Rav Nahman thought: Since Anan sent me this message, this man must be Anan's relative. A case regarding orphans was pending before him and he said: This is a positive commandment (i.e., to care for orphans) and this is a positive commandment (i.e., to show honor to Torah scholars and their families) but the latter takes precedence. He put off the orphans' case and took up the man's case. When his opponent saw the honor with which Rav Nahman regarded him, he gave up his case.

Elijah used to come to Rav Anan and teach him Seder Eliyah. When this incident happened, he stopped visiting him. Rav Anan sat and fasted and prayed for mercy and Elijah returned. But when Elijah came he frightened Rav Anan so Rav Anan made a box (an ark) and sat before him until Elijah taught him his Order. And this is what they say: Seder Eliyah Rabbah was what he learned before this incident and Seder Eliyah Zuta is what he learned after this incident. (B. Ketubot 105b-106a)

Discussion Questions:

1. Rav Anan did not mean to take a bribe but even the mere taking of a gift led to an injustice. With this as a guideline, how should today's judges, scholars, lawyers, rabbis, etc., limit themselves in terms of receiving gifts?
2. Why would Elijah's appearance frighten Rav Anan, especially when it hadn't before?