

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 19, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

COUNT DOWN TO ROSH HASHANAH

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At the request of one of my students, I have created a sort of "reverse Counting of the Omer" as a way to prepare for the High Holidays. Each week of Elul has study passages for each day, progressively leading one through the process of "reconciling accounts" until the "books should be balanced" by the time the first of Tishrei rolls in. The weeks have the following themes: (1) physical life (what I call "Bein adam l'gufo," i.e., "Between a person and his or her body") (2) emotional life ("Bein adam lachaveiro", "Between a person and other people") (3) intellectual life ("Bein adam l'da'ato," "Between a person and his or her intellect") and (4) spiritual life ("Bein adam lamakom," "Between a person and God"). I hope this path of study brings you a meaningful Elul and a sweet new year.

Physical Life: Bein adam l'gufo

2 Elul, August 19

How to Begin: Just Start!

Each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the [Red] sea [during the exodus]. Then Nahshon the son of Amminadav descended first into the sea [and then it parted]. (B. Sotah 37a)

3 Elul August 20

Did you wake up this morning? Did you know who you were? Then you're blessed.

When he hears the cock crowing he should say, "Blessed be the One who has given the cock the understanding to distinguish between day and night."

When he opens his eyes he should say, "Blessed be the One who opens the eyes of the blind."

When he stretches himself and sits up, he should say, "Blessed be the One who loosens the bound."

When he dresses he should say, "Blessed be the One who clothes the naked."

When he draws himself up he should say, "Blessed be the One who raises the bowed."

When he steps on to the ground he should say, "Blessed be the One who spread the earth on the waters."

When he commences to walk he should say, "Blessed be the One who makes firm the steps of man."

When he ties his shoes he should say, "Blessed be the One who has supplied all my wants."

When he fastens his girdle, he should say, "Blessed be the One who girds Israel with might."

When he spreads a kerchief over his head he should say, "Blessed be the One who crowns Israel with glory." (B. Berachot 60b)

4 Elul, August 21

God Uses Human Hands, So Use Yours For Charity

Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighborhood into whose door-socket he used to throw four zuz every day. Once [the poor man] thought, "I will go and see who does me this kindness." On that day [it happened] that Mar Ukba was late at the house of study and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as [the poor man] saw them moving the door he went out after them, but they fled from him and ran into a furnace from which the fire had just been swept. Mar Ukba's feet were burning and his wife said to him: Raise your feet and put them on mine. As he was upset, she said to him, "I am usually at home and my

benefactions are direct." (B. Ketubot 67b)

5 Elul, August 22

Sometimes We Need Physical Reminders to Do the Right Thing

It was taught: R. Nathan said, There is not a single precept in the Torah, even the lightest, whose reward is not enjoyed in this world; and as to its reward in the future world I know not how great it is. Go and learn this from the precept of tsitsit.

Once a man, who was very scrupulous about the precept of tsitsit, heard of a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold [denars] and appointed a day with her....

When he came in she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes [of his garment] struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off and sat upon the ground.

She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, 'By the Roman Capitol, I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me. 'By the Temple', he replied, 'never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is called tsitsit, and with regard to it the expression 'I am the Lord your God' is twice written, signifying, I am He who will exact punishment in the future, and I am He who will give reward in the future. Now [the tsitsit] appeared to me as four witnesses [testifying against me]'. She said, 'I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, the name of your school in which you study the Torah'. He wrote all this down and handed it to her.

Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the bed clothes, however, she retained. She then came to the Beit Hamidrash of R. Hiyya, and said to him, 'Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte'. 'My daughter', he replied; 'perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples?' She thereupon took out the script and handed it to him. 'Go', said he 'and enjoy your acquisition'. Those very bed-clothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully. This is the reward [of the precept] in this world; and as for its reward in the future world I know not how great it is. (B. Menachot 44a)

6 Elul, August 23

Atonement through Physical Suffering

It was said of Nahum Ish Gamzo that he was blinded in both his eyes. His two hands were cut off. His two legs were amputated, and his whole body was covered with boils and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed the feet of which were standing in bowls of water in order to prevent the ants from crawling on to him [since he was unable to drive them off his body himself]. His students sought to remove his bed [from the house] and afterward take out the utensils [from thence]. He said to them, "My sons, take out the utensils and afterward take out my bed for I assure you that all the time that I am in the house, the house will not fall." They took out the utensils and afterward took out his bed and the house [immediately] fell down.

His students said to him, "Rabbi, you are [clearly] a thoroughly righteous person [so] why has [all this] happened to you?" He said to them, "I brought it on my self, for one time I was walking on the way to the house of my father-in-law and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink and one with all kinds of dainties. One poor man came and stood in my way and said to me, "Rabbi, sustain me [with something to eat]." I said to him, "Wait until I unload [something] from the ass. And I did not succeed to unload [something] from the ass before he died [from hunger]. I went and fell upon his face and I said, 'My eyes, which did not have pity upon your eyes, may they become blind. My hands, which did not have pity upon your hands, may they be cut off. My legs, which did not have pity on your legs, may they be amputated.' And my conscience was not quiet until I said, 'May my whole body be covered with boils (sh'hin).'" They [his students] said to him, "Alas for us that we should see you like this." He said

to them, "Alas for me if you did not see me like this!"

Why was he called Nahum of Gamzu? - Because whatever befell him he would declare, This also is for the best. (B. Taanit 21a)

7 Elul, August 24

Suffering Can be an Expression of God's Love

Rabba, and some say Rav Chisda, said, "If a man sees that sufferings come to him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said, 'Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord. (Lamentations 3:40)'. If he examined [his deeds] and did not find [anything objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said, 'Happy is the man whom God chastens, and is taught from Your Torah.(Psalms 94:12)' If he did attribute it [thus], and [still] did not find [this to be the cause], then it is known that these are chastenings of love, for it is said, 'For those God loves, He reproves. (Proverbs 3:12)'" (B. Berachot 5a)

8 Elul August 25

Studying Torah Cures All Ills

R. Joshua b. Levi stated: If a man is on a journey and has no company let him occupy himself with the study of the Torah, since it is said in Scripture, "For they shall be a chaplet of grace. (Proverbs 1:9)" If he feels pains in his head, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "For they shall be a chaplet of grace unto your head.(Proverbs 1:9)" If he feels pain in his throat let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "And a necklace about your neck. (Proverbs 1:9)" If he feels pains in his bowels, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "It shall be a healing to your navel. (Proverbs 3:8)" If he feels pains in his bones, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "And healing to all his flesh.(Proverbs 4:22)" (B. Eruvin 54a)

Emotional Life: Bein adam lachaveiro

9 Elul August 26

Charity Must be Accompanied with Kindness

Rich' applies to one who is rich in property and 'poor' to one who is poor in property. If the poor man stood in the company of the rich and said to him: ' Give me charity' and he did not give it to him, then 'The Lord is the maker of them all'; He who made this one poor can make him rich and He who made the other rich can make him poor. If the rich man says to this same poor man: 'Why do you not go and work and get food? Look at those hips! Look at those legs! Look at that fat body! Look at those lumps of flesh!', the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: ' It is not enough that you have not given him anything of yours, but you must set an evil eye upon what I have given him, must you?' Consequently, If he hath begotten a son, there is nothing in his hand (Ecclesiastes 5:13). Of all that he possessed he will not leave for his son, nor take unto himself, anything! (Leviticus Rabbah 34:4)

10 Elul August 27

Don't Talk When People Can't Hear You

Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar says: Do not appease your fellow in the time of his anger; do not console him while his dead lies before him; do not question him about his vow at the time he makes it; and do not attempt to see him at the time of his disgrace. (M. Pirkei Avot 4:23)

11 Elul August 28

Let the Person Provide Their Own Meaning When They're Suffering

R. Abbahu was bereaved. One of his children had passed away from him. R. Jonah and R. Yose went up

[to comfort him]. When they called on him, out of reverence for him, they did not express to him a word of Torah. He said to them, "May the rabbis express a word of Torah." They said to him, "Let our master teach us." He said to them, "Now if in regard to the government below, in which there is no reliability, [but only] lying, deceit, favoritism and bribe-taking, which is here today and gone tomorrow, [if concerning that government] it is said, 'And the relatives [of the felon] come and inquire after the welfare of the judges and of the witnesses, as if to say "We have nothing in our hearts [against you], for you judged honestly (M. Sanhedrin 6:6)" in regard to the government above, in which there is reliability, but no lying, deceit, favoritism, or bribe-taking, and which endures forever and to all eternity, all the more so are we obligated to accept upon ourselves the just decree [of the heavenly government].'" (Y. Sanhedrin 6:12, 23d-24a)

12 Elul August 29 **God Feels Your Pain**

Imma Shalom said... I have this tradition from my father's house: All gates [to God, even the gates of prayer] are locked, except the gates of wounded feelings [which God hears, and responds to, immediately]. (B. Baba Metsia 59b)

13 Elul August 30 **You Must Be Correct And Nice to be Right: Being Correct is Not Enough**

For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting: the law is in agreement with our views, and the latter contending, the law is in agreement with our views. Then a voice from heaven announced: both rulings are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.

Since, however, both are the words of the living God, what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own.(B. Eruvin 13b)

14 Elul August 31 **Don't Let Low Self-Esteem Stop You From Doing Mitzvot**

The Holy One, blessed be He, will make a great banquet for the righteous on the day He manifests His love for the seed of Isaac. After they have eaten and drunk, the cup of Grace will be offered to our father Abraham that he should recite Grace, but he will answer them, "I cannot say Grace, because Ishmael issued from me." Then Isaac will be asked to say Grace, but he will answer them, "I cannot say Grace because Esau issued from me." Then Jacob will be asked, "Take it and say Grace." But he will reply, "I cannot say Grace because I married two sisters during [both] their lifetimes whereas the Torah was destined to forbid them to me." Then Moses will be asked, "Take it and say Grace." He will answer, "I cannot say Grace since I was not privileged to enter the Land of Israel either in life or in death." Then Joshua will be asked, "Take it and say Grace." But he will reply, "I cannot say Grace since I was not privileged to have a son."...Then David will be asked, "Take it and say Grace." He will reply, "I will say Grace and it is fitting for me to say Grace, as it is said, 'I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. (Psalm 116:13)" (B. Pesachim 119b)

15 Elul September 1 **Moderation is the Golden Path**

Said R. Joshua of the South, "Concerning three things-too much or too little of them is bad; but a moderate amount of them is good: [They are] yeast, salt and unwillingness [to serve as leader of the Prayer when called upon]. (Y. Berachot 5:3)

Intellectual Life: Bein adam l'da'ato

16 Elul September 2 **Integrity Wins**

A man is forbidden to go out into his field to ascertain its requirements on the Sabbath. An incident is related of a certain pious man who went out to his vineyard to ascertain its requirements, and, finding a breach therein, thought on the Sabbath of repairing it. He said, however: I will not repair it because I thought about it on the Sabbath. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He provided a caper-bush which grew up and fenced the breach and he maintained himself on it all his life (B. Shabbat 150b)

17 Elul September 3 **Some Things We Just Can't Understand**

R. Ammi said: There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity...An objection is raised: The ministering angels asked the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe! Why did You impose the death penalty on Adam?" Said He to them: I gave him an easy command, yet he violated it." They said, "But Moses and Aaron fulfilled the whole Torah yet they died." "God said, "There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked (Ecclesiastes 9:2)" (B. Shabbat 55a-b)

18 Elul September 4 **Who is Wise?**

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone. [The one who sees what is to be.]...Who is strong? The one who subdues his evil impulse...Who is rich? The one who is content with his lot...Who is honored? The one who honors others. (M. Avot 4:1)

19 Elul September 5 **See the Potential for Greatness in Everyone**

Ben Azzai used to say: Do not despise any person and do not consider anything impossible; for there is no one who does not have his hour and there is nothing that does not have its place. (M. Avot 4:2)

20 Elul September 6 **Study so Intensely You Create a Link Between Yourself and God**

It was related of Jonathan b. Uzziel [that] when he sat and studied the Torah, every bird that flew over him was burned. (B. Baba Batra 134a)

21 Elul September 7 **God Chooses You to Transmit Torah**

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav. When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing crowns on the letters. Said Moses, Lord of the Universe, Who stays your hand? He answered, There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws. Said Moses, Lord of the Universe, permit me to see him. He said, Turn around. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of Akiba's students and listened to the lesson]. Not being able to follow the arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, "How do you know it?" and he answered, "It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai" he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One blessed be He, and said, "Lord of the Universe, You have such a man and you give the Torah by me!?" He said, "Be silent, for such is my decree." (B. Menachot 29b)

22 Elul September 8 **Don't Let Your Intellect Get in the Way of Your Prayer Life**

There are seven kinds of pietists: The showy, the haughty, the bookkeeper, the parsimonious, the repaying,

the fearing, the loving.

The showy carries his good deeds on his shoulder.

The haughty says, "Wait for me. I am [busy] fulfilling commandments!"

The bookkeeper pays off each debt [i.e., sin] by performing a commandment.

The parsimonious says, "From the little I have, what can I set aside for performing commandments?"

The repaying says, "Tell me what sin I have committed and I will perform a commandment to offset it.

The fearing [pietist emulates] Job. The loving [pietist] emulates Abraham and none is more beloved of God than the loving [pietist who emulates] Abraham. (Y. Berachot 9:5)

Spiritual Life Bein adam laMaqom

23 Elul September 9

Develop Good Spiritual Habits

R. Hisda said in Mar Ukba's name: He who prays on the eve of the Sabbath and recites "and [the heaven and the earth] were finished (Genesis 2:1)", the two ministering angels who accompany man place their hands on his head and say to him, "and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged. (Isaiah 6:7)" It was taught, R. Yose son of R. Judah said: Two ministering angels accompany man on the eve of the Sabbath from the synagogue to his home, one a good [angel] and one an evil [one]. And when he arrives home he finds the lamp burning, the table laid and the couch [bed] covered with a spread, the good angel exclaims, "May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too]," and the evil angel unwillingly responds "amen". But if not, the evil angel exclaims, "May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too]: and the good angel unwillingly responds, amen." (B. Shabbat 119b)

24 Elul September 10

The Strongest Force in the World: Charity Conquers Even Death

[R. Yehudah] used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world.

The rock is hard but the iron cleaves it.

The iron is hard, but the fire softens it.

The fire is hard, but the water quenches it.

The water is strong, but the clouds bear it.

The clouds are strong, but the wind scatters them.

The wind is strong, but the body bears it.

The body is strong, but fright crushes it.

Fright is strong, but wine banishes it.

Wine is strong, but sleep works it off.

Death is stronger than all, and charity saves from death, as it is written, "Tsedakah delivers from death. (Proverbs 10:2)" (B. Baba Batra 10a)

25 Elul September 11

What Are the Criteria by Which God Will Judge Your Life?

Raba said, When one is led in for Judgment he is asked,

1. Did you deal faithfully [i.e., with integrity]?

2. Did you fix times for learning?

3. Did you engage in procreation?

4. Did you hope for salvation?

5. Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom?

6. Did you understand one thing from another?(B. Shabbat 30b-31a)

26 Elul September 12

See God's Image in Everyone

"Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)" Rabbi Akiba said: This is the greatest principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai quoted the verse: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In that day God created human beings in the likeness of God did God make him. (Genesis 5:1)" He said: This is a principle greater than that. (Sifra on Leviticus 19:18)

27 Elul September 13

Who Does God Love?

Three the Holy One, blessed be He, loves: he who does not become angry, he who does not become intoxicated, and he who does not insist on his [full] rights. Three things the Holy One, blessed be He, hates: he who speaks one thing with his mouth and another thing in his heart; and he who possesses evidence concerning his neighbor and does not testify for him; and he who sees something indecent in his neighbor and testifies against him alone. (B. Pesachim 113b)

28 Elul September 14

How to Get All Your Sins Forgiven

One who waves his right to retribution [i.e., is not insistent on his rights] is forgiven all his sins. (B. Megillah 28a //Rosh Hashanah 17a//B. Yoma 23a and 87b)

29 Elul September 15

How To Attain This World and the World to Come

Rav Judah said in Rav's name: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious, meek, middle-aged, free from bad temper, sober and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful thereof, and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by man and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world. (B. Kiddushin 71a)