

Talmud Passage of the Week

Title

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 09/09/96).

Getting Ready for the New Year

Dear Friends,

Greetings! The month of Elul, when we prepare for the new year, is here. The shofar is sounded each morning, trying to make us awaken and change our fate before the year begins. "How?" is question that arises. The Talmud, not surprisingly has an answer for us:

Bavli Rosh Hashanah, 16b:

Four things cancel the doom of a man, namely, charity, supplication, change of name and change of conduct.

Charity, as it is written, "And charity delivers from death. (Proverbs 10:2)" Supplication as it is written, "They cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. (Psalm 107:6)"

Change of name as it is written, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. (Genesis 17:15)" And it continues, "And I will bless her and moreover I will give you a son by her. (Genesis 17:15)"

Change of conduct, as it is written, "And God saw their works," and it continues, "and God repented of the evil which He said He would do unto them and He did it not. (Jonah 3:10)"

Some say that change of place [also avails], as it is written, "Now the Lord said unto Avram, Get you out of your country" and it proceeds, "and I will make of you a great nation. (Genesis 12:1,2)"

Background

Let's take a look at these prooftexts and their contexts. The verse from Proverbs reads, "Treasures of wickedness profit nothing but righteousness delivers from death. (Proverbs 10:20)." The contrast is clear: wickedness brings everlasting death and charity, everlasting life. Not only that, it saves one from death. The verse from Psalms comes after describing how those in the psalm wandered in the wilderness and were fainting from hunger and thirst. All they had to do was cry out to God, and God saved them. The change of name from Sarai to Sarah comes after Avram joins into the covenant of circumcision with God and his name is changed to Avraham. It is the covenant, represented by the name changes, perhaps, that has actually changed their fate. The verse from Jonah highlights what God pays attention to: the *deeds* of the people of Ninveh, not their fasting and sackcloth. Finally, Avram's fate changes greatly when he leaves Mesopotamia to go to the Promised Land.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of any other Biblical (or Talmudic) examples of change of X resulting in a better fate for the

character in the story? For example, Ishmael cries out to God and is answered (Genesis 21:16-17). Moses cries out for his sister's healing and is answered (Numbers 12:13).

You may think of modern equivalents, as well. How did your life change when your name changed from Mr./Ms. to Doctor/Rabbi/Librarian/Nurse, etc.?

2. The Gemara suggests that objective actions are the way to repentance. Do concrete actions avail us when there is little or no internal motivation? To what extent? Why?

3. Avram and Sarai are the templates this passage gives us for repentance. They are willing to give up everything: money, security, familiarity, the reputations they have made, in order to pursue a dream in an unseen wilderness. We often think of giving money to charity or changing our names (reputations as well as actual names), conduct and places as losing things. But what energy would you liberate in yourself if you gave up one or some or all of these things? How would your life be different and better? What would you be able to receive that you can't receive now?

Have a meaningful Elul!