

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 26, 1999 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Dear Friends,

Greetings! May this month of Elul bring us great insight, charity and repentance as we ready ourselves for the High Holidays. It has been a joy to study with you and I look forward to it in the year to come.

May I ask you to consider becoming a Maqom Associate by making a tax-deductible contribution to Maqom of \$36 or whatever you wish? Your financial, intellectual, emotional and spiritual support are all deeply valued.

God bless you!
Judy Abrams

RABBI AKIBA AND VISITING THE SICK

Visiting the sick is one of the highest mitsvot in Judaism. Rabbi Akiba took it especially seriously after an incident showed him how important it was. The mishnah to which our story is attached is about vowed but how even vowed against benefiting from a neighbor doesn't mean that neighbor should be ignored at a time of need.

If one made a vow against deriving any benefit from his fellow's belongings and he went in to visit him he stands but he may not sit. And he may participate in healing his soul but not in healing his belongings. (M. Nedarim 4:4, 38b)

Imagine you've taken a vow against enjoying anything a person owns. You couldn't rightfully sit in one of his chairs since that would be benefiting from something he owned. And one might not be able to take care of the sick person's property while under such a vow. But one is allowed to help heal the person.

The Bavli tells this story about Rabbi Akiba and how he learned about the importance of visiting the sick:

It once happened that one of Rabbi Akiba's students became ill. The sages did not go in to visit him. [When] Rabbi Akiba came to visit [this student]. For [Rabbi Akiba's] sake they swept and sprinkled [the ground] before him. He said to him: Rabbi, you have given me life. Rabbi Akiba went out and expounded: Anyone who does not visit the sick, it is as if he shed [human] blood. (B. Nedarim 40a)

Rabbi Akiba's student was lying in misery and in a filthy environment. It was only when Rabbi Akiba came to visit him that this disciple cleaned up the room and made it one in which a convalescent might get well. All this is not lost on the student who exclaims, "You have enlivened me, Rabbi Akiba!" From this experience, Rabbi Akiba generated a formal rule, which applies to this day: those who do not visit the sick are held liable for shedding human blood. The care and company they might have provided on their visit could have meant the difference between death and life to the sick person.

Discussion Questions

1. The mishnah describes an awkward situation. Here is a person who has made a vow against someone else and yet he must visit this same person when he is sick. How might the visit change the relationship? For the better? For the worse?

2. The mitsvah of visiting the sick can be unpalatable: people are at their worst. They may be cranky, demanding and depressed. Do you think this is one of the reasons Rabbi Akiba made his rule so harsh, i.e., making not visiting the sick akin to a capital crime? On the other hand, visiting the sick can produce tender acts of love, genuine communication and healing. Have you had either or both of these experiences? Does it matter whether you are the one being visited or the visitor?