

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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Dear Friends,

You will, God willing, be reading this message on or near the beginning of the month of Elul. For this month, we prepare for the High Holidays by doing teshuvah and charity. We are to change. We are to make things different. It was this idea of making a difference that led me to our study for this session.

May I ask that you make a difference to Maqom? Please make a tax-deductible donation of \$18, \$36 or whatever amount you can to Maqom (POB 31900-3232 Houston, Tx 77231). The Maqom site averages over 550 hits per day and the email list has roughly 200 subscribers. Please help Maqom stay out here on the internet bringing Talmud to people around the world.

Thank you and may you have a blessed new year!

Judith Abrams

Havdalah is one of those wonderful rituals that can be done in synagogue or at home. The sages leave great room for creativity when mandating what form havdalah should take:

You mention no less than three differences and no more than seven in the havdalah blessing. "One must close [the prayer of division with a blessing that mentions] division [i.e., Blessed are You God who divides the sacred from the profane]. (Y. Berachot 5:2)

Thus, it would appear that we can choose the differences that mean the most to us when we make this benediction. The root of the word "difference between" in Hebrew is bet-dalet-lamed. It occurs in the following verses in Torah:

Light and darkness (Genesis 1:4, 18)
Upper waters and lower waters (Genesis 1:6,7)
Day and night (Genesis 1:18)
Highest holiness, holiness and everyday (Exodus 26:33, Leviticus 10:10)
Israel and other nations (Leviticus 20:24, 26)
Pure and impure (Leviticus 11:47, 20:25)
Levites and Israelites (Numbers 8:14, Deuteronomy 10:8)
The meek and the power-hungry (Numbers 16:21)
Places of refuge and places of vengeance (Deuteronomy 19:2,7)
True and untrue of heart (Deuteronomy 29:20)

Which of these would you choose for your last Shabbat? Would you always choose the same ones or, now that you know you have a choice, change things around to suit each week?

The root bet-dalet-lamed = 36 in numerology. Thirty-six is double chai, "double life." What can you do different this year that will double the richness, joy and holiness of your life?

Rosh Hashanah is characterized as the birthday of the world. The light of the first day of creation was different from

any other:

The light created on the first day lasted thirty-six hours: twelve on the Sabbath eve, twelve on the night of the Sabbath and twelve on the Sabbath day. And Adam gazed out [in the primeval night] upon the whole world. When the light did not cease, the whole world sang out, as it says, "Under the whole heaven they sang out to Him whose light extends to the corners of the earth. (Job 37:2)" When the Sabbath ended, darkness began to minister [over the world]. Adam became frightened and said, "Concerning this the Scripture says, 'He [man] will bruise your head, and you [the serpent] shall bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15)' Perhaps now [that it is dark] he will come to bruise me. [Because] it says [elsewhere], "In darkness he will bruise me. (Psalm 139:11)"

Said R. Levi, "At that very time God summoned two flints and he [Adam] struck them against each other and light came forth from them. This is as it is written, 'And the night around me be light. (Psalm 139:11)' And he [Adam] recited the blessing, "Who creates the lights of fire." Samuel said: "We therefore recite the blessing over fire at the conclusion of the Sabbath, for that was when it was first created.

Rav Huna in the name of R. Abahu in the name of R. Yohanan, "They even recite the blessing [over the fire] at the conclusion of the Day of Atonement, for the light 'rested' throughout that day." [That is, it is forbidden to kindle a fire on that day and so after the day, it is as if fire were created anew.] (Y. Berachot 8:6)

The root letters can also be rearranged to spell lavad, "alone". It would seem that Adam felt alone and that light gave him a sense of safety and companionship. This passage from the Yerushalmi is also a help with the problematic nature of blessing God for the "lights" of fire and not just "light". This plural form has caused many practices that may seem odd. For example, people shine the light of the candle off their fingernails so that there is more than one source of life. How else might you perform this? For example, you could shine the candle in a mirror or have it reflect in water.

Finally, as so often happens in rabbinic literature, the sages try to include those who aren't quite as erudite as they were.

One who is fluent recites many havdalot and one who is not fluent recites one or two. (T. Berachot 5:30)

So you can begin with one or two and work your way up to the maximum!

May this Elul bring a different and blessed new year to you!

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