

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 29, 2002 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

Visit [Talmud: the Musical](#) or download a song! 

[Song 1 \(2409kb\)](#)    [Song 2 \(4222kb\)](#)

(If you have trouble playing it as streaming audio, "right click" to download the entire file and then open it.)

---

## Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

---

BH

## LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING . . .

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2002

In the course of my research on the term halakhah in rabbinic literature I have come across an interesting phenomenon that sheds a new light on the very first mishnah of the entire Mishnah.

Rabban Gamliel has many rulings recorded in his name. Quite frequently, and far more so than with any other sage, these rulings are connected to a "ma'aseh", a story.

With that in mind let's look at the very first mishnah one studies:

From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening? From the time that the priests enter [their houses] in order to eat their terumah until the end of the first watch. These are the words of R. Eliezer. And the sages say: until midnight. Rabban Gamaliel says: until the dawn comes up.

It is told that once [Rabban Gamliel's] sons were coming home [late] from a feast. They said to him: "We have not yet recited the [evening] Shema." He said to them, "If the dawn has not yet come up you are obligated to recite it." And not in respect to this alone did they so decide, but wherever the sages said 'until midnight', the obligation to perform the mitzvah extends until the dawn comes up....If this is so, then why did the sages say 'until midnight'? To keep a man far from transgression. (M. Berachot 1:1)

First of all, by including Rabban Gamliel's story in this first mishnah, we are put on alert that these stories are a feature of the Mishnah that is important. There are actually extraordinarily few stories in the Mishnah so the story here is particularly important. Note, too, that Rabban Gamliel's ruling ends up being accepted.

It seems that Rabban Gamliel had his own way of teaching and thinking. He uses stories as a jumping off point for rulings. This is a very effective way of teaching. The mind is used to stories and is engaged by them.

I confess that before I did this research on Rabban Gamliel I was predisposed to see him in a somewhat negative light: elitist, rich, out of touch with the harsh lives that many of the sages had to live and, frankly, not the brightest of the sages. My research into halakhah and my discovery of Rabban Gamliel's set of stories has truly changed my opinion of the man. He understands that the story is the best way to help people understand an idea. Our minds are, somehow, designed to accept stories better than lists of facts or rules.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. It definitely appears that Rabban Gamliel had a collection of stories, some of which were included in the Mishnah. What does this tell us about Rabban Gamliel? What does this tell us about the Mishnah?
2. We have Rabbi Eliezer and Rabban Gamliel named in the very first mishnah. They were brothers-in-law but clearly had different styles of teaching and didn't particularly like each other according to the legends. How does that play into our developing view of the Mishnah as a document written by and for a small, elite group?
3. Do stories help you learn? How?