

Talmud Passage of the Week

Three strikes - you're out!

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 09/24/96).

Dear Friends,

Greetings. As we come closer and closer to the new year, repentance is more and more in my thoughts. Hence, our Talmud passage for this period.

Please accept my best good wishes for a sweet new year full of joy, study, mitzvot and righteousness!

Judy Abrams

Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86b:

It was taught: Rabbi Meir used to say, Great is repentance, for on account of an individual who repents, the sins of all the world are forgiven, as it is said, "I will heal *their* backsliding I will love *them* freely, for My anger is turned away from *him*.(Hosea 14:5)" "from them" it is not said, but "from him".

How is one proved a repentant sinner? Rav Yehudah said: If the object which caused his original transgression comes before him on two occasions, and he keeps away from it. Rav Yehudah indicated: With the same woman, at the same time, in the same place.

Rav Yehudah said: Rav pointed out the following contradictions. It is written, "Happy is he whose transgression is covered whose sin is pardoned. (Psalm 32:1)" and it is also written: "He that covers his transgression shall not prosper? (Proverbs 28:13)" This is no difficulty, one speaks of sins that have become known [to the public] the other of such as did not become known.

Rav Zutra bar Toviyah in the name of Rav Nahman said: Here we speak of sins committed by a man against his fellow, there of sins committed by man against God.

It was taught: Rabbi Yose bar Yehudah said: If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven, as it is said, "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, yea for four, I will not reverse it. (Amos 2:6)" and furthermore it says, "Lo, all these things does God work, twice, yea three times with a man. (Job 33:29)" What does "furthermore" serve for [why do we need this extra proof-text from Job]? One might have assumed that [the principle of forgiving the first three sins] applies only to a community, but not to an individual, therefore, come and hear [the additional verse]: "Lo, all these things does God work twice, yea, three times with a *man*.[which proves that this is also true of an individual]"

Background

Hosea

Rabbi Meir's proof-text comes near from the end of Hosea's prophecy. It turns on a fine point of grammar. First God

promises to heal a group's ("their") backsliding but then says that His anger is turned away from an individual, "him".

Covered Sin

Is it better to cover up one's sins or confess them in public and make them known? The first verse, Psalm 32:1, seems to suggest that a person should cover up their sin and not reveal it. The verse from Proverbs suggests the opposite: anyone who doesn't reveal his sins will fail. This dilemma is resolved by Rav. Once a person's sin has become widely known, he or she should also widely disseminate news of his or her repentance. But if the sin is not widely known, then one should not broadcast news of one's repentance.

Rav Zutra, quoting Rav Nahman has a different interpretation of this matter. He thinks that one should make known one's repentance if it was a sin against another person. But repentance for a sin against God need not be widely publicized. Sins against another person are, e.g., cheating, stealing, hurting feelings. Sins against God are, e.g., eating non-kosher food, violations of Shabbat and so forth.

Second and Third Chances

There is some disagreement as to what this means. It could be that it refers to a sin for which repentance is done. Or it could refer to different sins.

Discussion Questions

1. Tease out the dimensions we are working with here in terms of public/private; individual/communal, etc. What are the basic "grids" whereby we can analyze sin and repentance presented in this passage?
2. How could one person's repentance save a whole group of people?
3. When is making your repentance known helpful? Hurtful? Are some things better left "covered up"? Is there any case in which sins against God, and repentance for them, could be made known and this would be productive?
4. How do you evaluate the concept that God doesn't punish the first three sins a person does? Is it a relief or does it make you angry?