

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 25, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Dear Friends,

First, let me wish you a shanah tovah. May the new year bring you joy!

Second, there will be two staged readings of the musical now entitled "A Talmud Tale" in New York City on November 2 and 3. Please contact me at maqom@compassnet.com if you want to be invited to what will certainly be an enjoyable evening. Thanks to all of you who supported this project!

Third, our passage is all about repentance which should be on all of our "to do" lists at this time of year.

Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where penitents stand even the wholly righteous cannot stand, as it says, "Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near. (Isaiah 57:19"-to him that was far first and then to him that is near. Rabbi Yohanan said: What is meant by "far"? One who from the beginning was far from transgression. And what is meant by "near"? That he was once near to transgression and now has gone far from it. (B. Berachot 34b)

The sages assure us that no matter how far we may have strayed, there is always a way back to God. Not only will God take us back, we will be more treasured than those who never strayed. Naturally, the sages want to qualify this statement, lest it encourage people to stray, but it is still a message of hope: God is forgiving, merciful and loving.

Discussion Questions:

1. We find in the story of Elisha ben Abuya, the great sage who then became an apostate known as Aher, a most poignant scene:

Our Rabbis taught: Once Aher was riding on a horse on the Sabbath and Rabbi Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah at his mouth. Said [Aher] to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath limit.⁴⁴ He replied: Thou, too, go back! [Aher] answered: Have I not already told thee that I have already heard from behind the Veil: 'Return ye backsliding children' - except Aher. (B. Hagigah 15a)

When a person knows that no matter what they do they will not be forgiven what is the outcome? How can we leave a door open for even the most heinous of sinners? Is repentance always possible or are there some sins for which we cannot repent?

2. Not only are we to repent during the High Holidays, we are also to forgive. Beruriah can give us some guidance here:

There were once some highwaymen in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. Rabbi Meir would [accordingly] pray that they should die. His wife Beruriah said to him: How do you make out [that such a prayer should be permitted?]? Because it is written "Let hatta'im (sins) cease"? Is it written [let] hot'im (sinners) [cease]? It is written hatta'im(sins)! And further, look at the end of the verse: "and let the wicked be no more. (Psalm 104:35)" Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked men! Rather pray for them that they should repent, and [then] "the wicked will be no more". He did pray for them and they repented. (B. Berachot 10a)

Praying that sinners repent requires us to stand in their shoes and analyze what, specifically, is the sin and how could it be vanquished. Do you think this technique could help you do the work of forgiving? If so, how? If not, why not?

Do you think that those who've sinned and repented come closer to God? Why or why not?

Can you imagine some creative ways of leaving open the possibility of repentance?

May you be written into the Book of Life!