

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 29, 2005 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

LEARN TO FORGIVE YOURSELF

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Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone. [The one who sees what is to be.]...Who is strong? The one who subdues his evil impulse...Who is rich? The one who is content with his lot...Who is honored? The one who honors others. (M. Avot 4:1) *Who is forgiven? The one who forgives others. Who forgives? The one who forgives himself.*

"Love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)" Rabbi Akiba said: This is the greatest principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai quoted the verse: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In that day God created human beings in the likeness of God did God make him. (Genesis 5:1)" He said: This is a principle greater than that. (Sifra on Leviticus 19:18)

The High Holidays are generally considered a time to assess our lives and beg forgiveness of those we have wronged. We are to come face to face with our flaws and sins and vow to do better. This is, of course, a very good approach to repentance...but it doesn't address a significantly large part of the population who are constantly blaming themselves and berating themselves because they don't live up to some impossibly high standard. Just look at the way people berate themselves simply for not being thin. They go to the point of risking their lives in surgery just to look like some idealized standard. An even greater number feel themselves impossibly deficient in emotional, intellectual and spiritual ways.

So these two passages of rabbinic literature are offered to help those who can't seem to forgive themselves. The first is one of the most famous passages from Pirkei Avot but I have added a bit to it (the part in italics). These are simply logical extension of the pattern set out by Ben Zoma. If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive others. And if we want to learn how to forgive, we must begin with ourselves.

For those who find this an almost impossible task, the next text may help. It is from Sifra, the early midrash collection on the book of Leviticus. The logic behind the prevailing opinion is as follows. If you don't love yourself, and you love your neighbor the way you love yourself, then you'll treat your neighbor badly. But if you remember that everyone, yourself included, is made in God's image, then you will treat everyone, including yourself, the way they ought to be treated.

Discussion Questions:

1. If forgiving yourself isn't on your psychological "hard drive" how can you put "install" it there now? Can you write out what this forgiving voice might say to you?
2. Can you identify a part of yourself that is clearly made in God's image? How much of yourself is made in God's image?

Shanah tovah!