

URRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Learn with Rabbi Abrams! If you like the website, you'll love learning with Rabbi Abrams in person even more! She can come to your synagogue or group as a scholar-in-residence or you can learn with her long distance via phone or skype. You can also have her teach single lectures to your group. Click [here](#) for a list of just a few of the talks available.

Posted October 22, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

RABBAN GAMLIEL'S EXCEPTIONAL SERVANTS

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2009

We know that Rabban Gamliel had a slave to whom he was very close (Tavi, M. Berachot 2:7); so close that he sat shivah for him. He also had a female slave who was exceptional, Tavita. (Both slaves' names come for the word meaning "good", i.e., tov.)

It happened that Tavita, Rabban Gamliel's serving girl, was carrying wine for drinks. She inspected herself to see if her period had begun before lifting up each jug of wine.

When her period started, she said to Rabban Gamliel: My lord, I have seen a blood stain on my garment.

Rabban Gamliel was upset at the possibility that the wine had been rendered ritually unclean.

She said to him: No worries. I was inspecting myself before lifting each jug. (Y. Niddah 2:1)

[And in the parallel in Leviticus Rabbah, Metsorah 19:4, Rabban Gamliel is so happy he exclaims: May your life be given to you, even as you have restored mine to me!]

Discussion Questions:

You need to get an accurate picture in your mind of what's going on here. (Don't worry, it won't get gross.) She's checking herself, but she's also checking the wine before she serves it, to make sure it's good. This was in the days before glass bottles that were sealed, so that all wine came out the same. She, herself, might have had to mix the wine concentrate with the water. Remember, Rabban Gamliel is the head of the academy and a billionaire. His guests may have included those who were punctilious about ritual purity. So before she's checking each jug, she's checking herself. It's a parallel scene of double responsibility.

There's also an "upstairs/downstairs" sort of feel to the scene. She's in and out of the dining room, publicly checking the wine in view of the diners. Then she stops doing so and Rabban Gamliel notices.

1. The working assumption is that Tavita is not Jewish, yet she observes the rules of ritual purity scrupulously on behalf of her employer. Can you think of any other examples of such people in Jewish history? People who have been fellow travelers with Jews? Who have taken on Jewish values and lifestyle?
2. Could Tavita have been Tavi's wife? Could these have been nicknames or honorific titles? Can you imagine the backstory of these slaves? How they came to be in Rabban Gamliel's employ?

October 22, 2009

P.S. Thanks to all who looked at the Torah scroll writing with all the crowns, trees and flowers. If you want to see them, become my facebook friend and then go to photos.