

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted November 9, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### WISDOM LITERATURE AND GENESIS

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Recently, I have frequently had the experience of looking at a familiar text with a fresh perspective and the results have truly stunned me. You can see from the Previous Passages that the "conventional" definition of halakhah was certainly not what the sages of rabbinic literature had in mind when they used it.

I had another such eye-opening experience contemplating Genesis 3:1-4:16. I had been taught that the Priestly version of creation was the first chapter of Genesis and the first 3 verses of Genesis 2. Then we had the a J/E account of creation in which human beings are made of clay and Eve is made from Adam's rib.

Then we come to the story of Cain and Abel. How many times had I read this story and not understood that it was the Wisdom Literature's version of creation.

Think of the parallels:

Abel's name in Hebrew is Hevel, meaning "vanity" or, in this case, it would be as if you named one of your children, "The One Who Is To Die". Not only that but this word also appears with great emphasis in the beginning of Ecclesiastes (a work of Wisdom Literature along with the Book of Job, the prophet Habakkuk, Proverbs and some of the Psalms):

Vanity of vanities (haveil havalim) said Kohelet; vanity of vanities (haveil havalim) all is vanity (havel).  
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

This is not the only link to Wisdom Literature. In the Book of Job, Satan urges God to put Job to the test. In Genesis 3:1, the snake tempts Eve and Adam to eat of the tree of knowledge. The first death in the entire Torah is a murder. This fits well with the cynical view of life found in the Wisdom Literature.

The name of Hevel occurs seven times in Genesis 3:1-4:16. If we interpret the second verse of Ecclesiastes making the conservative assumption that the plural forms there mean "two" then that verse also has the word seven times. (The name Kayyin occurs 14 times in our passage.)

#### Discussion Questions:

1. If the Wisdom Literature version of creation is so prominently placed in Genesis, then why is it that it is almost never labeled as such?
2. Contrast the three views of creation which we've discussed here: the priestly, orderly one in seven days, the Mesopotamian one about creating people from clay and the Wisdom Literature one. What is the underlying message of each of these stories of creation?
3. Wisdom Literature is usually characterized as a late part of Hebrew Scriptures. Yet it was important enough to have its own version of the creation story included in Genesis. How did this story get into Genesis? Was it retroactively put into Genesis or is Wisdom Literature more ancient than we've generally been led to believe?

4. Check out Chris Benton's article on Kohelet (<http://www.maqom.com/journal/journal.html>) for more on this topic!