

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

IT'S NOT ABOUT LAW

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The Global Day of Learning, marking the completion of Rabbi Steinsaltz's translation of the Babylonian Talmud into modern Hebrew, saw me in Allentown, PA. Barbara Sussman and a crew of volunteers put on one of the most exciting days of study I've ever experienced. The building was rocking! Imma Shalom came up and introduced herself as Rabban Gamliel's sister and Rabbi Eliezer's wife. Honi the Circle Drawing miracle worker handed me his business card. Wow! What a day!

We did look at one story from Bavli that engendered some discussion and it made me wonder what all of you would say about it.

Here it is:

Greetings from the Heavenly Academy would come everyday to Abba the bloodletter. To Abaye they would come every Friday and to Rava every year on the day before Yom Kippur

Abaye was dejected on account of Abba the bloodletter. People would say to him: You are unable to perform the deeds that he performs.

And what were the righteous deeds that Abba the bloodletter did? When he engaged in bloodletting, he would keep the men and the women apart. And he had a special garment containing the bloodletting cup, which had a slit for the bloodletting lancet. When a woman came to him, she wore the garment and it preserved her privacy.

And he had a hidden place where clients would pay so that whoever could pay would put in a coin and whoever did not could not and not be embarrassed. When a Talmudic scholar would come to Abba, he would not take a fee from him. Abba would give him money and say to him: Go, buy food and regain your strength.

One day Abaye sent a pair of sages to check Abba's righteousness.

They sat down in Abba's house and he fed them, gave them something to drink and spread out rags for them to sleep on during the night. In the morning, they rolled up Abba's rugs, got up and went out to the market with them.

Abba found the Sages selling his rugs, but didn't say anything. They said to him: of what did you suspect

us when you found the rugs were gone? He answered: Perhaps they were going to sell them in order to redeem a captive but were too embarrassed to tell me. The sages said: Please, take the rugs back. But Abba said: From the time I saw that they were gone I considered I was doing an act of charity, so I cannot now take them back. (B. Taint 21b-22a)

Discussion Questions:

1. What caught the attention of several learners in Allentown was the behavior of Abaye and those two sages. How could Abaye direct two sages to commit theft and entrapment? And why on earth did those sages go along with this plan? They are clearly not behaving honorably, and seen through the lens of today's halation, they were acting illegally. And it's not as if Abaye is some backbench sage. He's an A-lister, which makes it all the worse. How would you justify Abaye and the sages' behavior? Could you do it at all?
2. This story isn't about law. It's a tale of righteousness...outside the realm of halachah. When we take halachah out of the picture, does the story make more sense? The Gemara is telling us that you can be learned and pious but that honoring people's dignity surpasses these qualities. Do you agree? Do you know anyone who's like Abba the bloodletter? Please tell us about them?
3. We know that Abaye can be very suspicious:

Abaye said, Against scholars more than anyone else [does the Evil inclination act]; as was the case when Abaye heard a certain man saying to a certain woman, "Let us arise betimes and go on our way." Said [Abaye], "I will follow them in order to keep them away from transgression" and he followed them for three parasangs across the meadows. When they parted company he heard them say, "Our company is pleasant, the way is long". Said Abaye, "If it were I, I could not have restrained myself", and so he went and leaned in deep anguish against a doorpost, when a certain old man [i.e., Elijah] came up to him and taught him: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination. (B. Sukkah 52a)

Could we make a rationale for Abaye that his pride was so wounded that he was justified in testing Abba the bloodletter? Has anything like this happened to you or someone you know? When does the desire to be recognized-by God or by people-lead to this sort of backbiting behavior, and why?

God bless you! Looking forward to your answers.