

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

### HOW THE TALMUD WAS MADE: CLUES IN THE TEXT

I hope that we have studied together enough by now that it is clear that the Bavli is put together purposefully and beautifully. This time, I'd like us to study a particular kind of passage we find in the Bavli called a memra. Avraham Weiss, the great Talmud commentator of the last century said that there were two kinds of memrot: running commentaries on the mishnah which became the earliest stratum of the gemara and collections on a particular subject or sayings of a single sage. We will take up the latter form here. This memra comes in the commentary to the following mishnah:

One should not stand up to say tefillah save in a reverent frame of mind. The pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying in order that they might concentrate their thoughts upon their Father in heaven. Even if a king greets him [while praying] he should not answer him: even if a snake is wound round his heel he should not break off. (M. Berachot 5:1)

This mishnah is straightforward: prayer requires preparation and concentration. Now, the gemara comes and brings a mnemonic, a device for remembering hard to remember subjects. For example HOMES reminds us of the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior. The presence of a mnemonic is quite often like a flashing sign that says "here comes a memra of sayings by a single sage". Here, they are the sayings of Rabbi Elazar who had much to say on the topic of prayer:

(Mnemonic: Deeds, charity offering, priest, fast, lock, iron.)

R. Elazar said: Prayer is more efficacious even than good deeds.

R. Elazar also said: Fasting is more efficacious than charity. What is the reason? One is performed with a man's money, the other with his body.

R. Elazar also said: Prayer is more efficacious than offerings.

R. Elazar also said: From the day on which the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed. But though the gates of prayer are closed the gates of weeping are not closed.

R. Elazar also said: Since the day that the Temple was destroyed a wall of iron has intervened between Israel and their Father in heaven. (B. Berachot 32a-b)

Memrot like these show how set pieces were inserted into the Talmud text at appropriate junctures. After all, this memra could have been put in tractate Taanit which speaks extensively about prayer and fasting or somewhere else in tractate Berachot.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Analyze Rabbi Elazar's statements. Are they entirely consistent? What is his viewpoint on prayer? Rank order

what he feels the most efficacious means of reaching God are? Are we better off with the Temple or without it and its sacrifices?

2. Why is this memra placed with this mishnah and not some other in tractate Berachot?