

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHERE DO I RANK? A STORY OF INTRIGUE

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The competition to be the best, brightest, richest, strongest or best-looking is one most of us know from our childhoods. The sages were not immune from these competitive urges. Some people were blessed by the accident of birth. The sages, however, devised a way to circumvent this system and make learning more important than one's blood line in deciding the pecking order:

A Priest goes before a Levite.

A Levite goes before an Israelite.

An Israelite goes before a bastard....

When does this order of priorities apply? When they are all equal in knowledge.

But if a bastard was a student of a sage

and a High Priest was an ignoramus,

the bastard who was a student of a sage goes before an ignorant High Priest.

(M. Horayot 3:8)

This mishnah acknowledges that blood lines are important. Yet it also sends the liberating message that regardless of one's inherited status, one can overcome it by participating in the sages' system of learning and holiness.

Now we come to our story of intrigue. Its protagonist is Rabban Gamliel, who headed up the Academy and who was at the center of many power struggles there. He was the Nasi (the President of the Academy) and came from an illustrious lineage but other sages outshone him in intelligence and learning. The junior officers in the Academy were Rabbi Meir, the Hakham (literally, 'Sage') and Rabbi Natan, the Av Beit Din (literally, the 'Father of the Court), a deputy to the Nasi. Here's how the story begins:

When Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel would come into the Academy everyone would rise before him. When Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Natan would come in everyone would rise. Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: Shouldn't there be a difference between the way they and I are recognized? Therefore he set this ruling: The people should not rise before Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Natan. Now the day on which he made this ruling was one on which neither Rabbi Meir nor Rabbi Natan were there.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does blood lineage still carry with it advantages and disadvantages in our open society? How or how not? Can you name some examples?
2. Why is Rabban Gamliel making such a fuss? He does, after all, have the money, the family and the position. Why does he make the ruling when neither Rabbi Meir nor Rabbi Natan is there? Why is this a mistake...or is it a mistake?
3. Have you seen people act this way in your life? How do such stories end? How do you think it will end for these three great sages?

Tune in in two weeks....!