

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHAT IS A SUGYA?

What is a Sugya?

Sugya can mean to walk or a cane that directs the walk and is not used as a support. But most frequently in Talmud study it means a lesson, subject, practice or usage.

In Biblical Hebrew, the root can mean "to fence about".

Your body is like a heap of wheat surrounded (sugah) by lilies. (Song of Songs 7:3)

It is known in rabbinic literature (B. Shabbat 66b and B. Sanhedrin 6a) but not in the way it has come to be known.

Avraham Weiss, the great Talmudist, divides sugyot, that is, passages or "chunks" of Talmud into two classifications:

1. short, explanatory note to Mishnah or some other older source
--explanatory sugya developed from this
2. independent, short statement, the memra. s
--independent sugya developed from this

According to Weiss, "Each sugya has its own individual character and history (an important conclusion for his view of the development of the Talmud as a whole with which I utterly agree.)" Each sugya has its own history and style.

We can see the development of a sugya in this commentary to the mishnah which equates hurting a person fiscally with hurting them emotionally.

Just as there is [fraud by] over reaching in buying and selling so there is wrong done by words. [Thus] one may not say to another, "What is the price of this thing?" if he do not wish to purchase it. If a man had repented, one must not say to him, "Remember your former deeds!" If a man were a descendant from converts one must not say to him, "Remember the deeds of your of your forefathers!" As it is said,, "And a stranger shall you not wrong, neither shall you oppress him. (Exodus 22.20)" (M. Baba Matsia 4:10)

This mishnah shows that the hurt of words can be quantified. In the Gemara, many examples are brought of hurting people with words. Here is one of them:

Rave also said: He who follows his wife's counsel will descend into Gehenna (the Hebrew word for Hell) ...Rav Papa objected to Abaye: But people say, If your wife is short, bend down and hear her whisper!

There is no difficulty: the one [i.e., the former] refers to general matters; the other to house hold affairs.

Another version: the one [i.e., the former] refers to religious matters, the other to secular questions. (B.

Baba Metsia 59a)

Rav makes one statement. Rav Papa objects to it and then the stamma, the anonymous editor of the Talmud, steps in to resolve the controversy. The stamma has a distinctive, recognizable quality which, once identified, practically proclaims itself to you every time you see it. Stammaitic material is in Aramaic, as opposed to some of the earlier components of Talmud which are often in Hebrew. It expresses a sort of "Split the difference/reconcile all the view " perspective which is clearly distinctive.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Gemara itself does not refer to chunks of material as sugyot. I hope you are beginning to see how the Talmud was constructed. What do you think of the process? Where do you fit in that process?
2. Can you isolate the voice of the stamma? How does that voice help? How does that voice hinder our interpretation of the sages' arguments.
3. If you were the stamma, how would you reconcile the differences between Rav and Rav Papa? Or would you leave them as two divergent opinions?