

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted December 22, 1999 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

RABBI AKIBA AND HIS TEACHER, NACHUM GAMZU (PART 1)

One of Rabbi Akiba's greatest teachers was a sage named Nahum Ish Gamzo. This sage's name is illustrative of his righteousness: Nahum is related to the idea of Divine comfort (nehamah) and the reason he is called Ish Gamzo is that he is the man (ish) who always says, "This, too (gam zo) is for the good. (B. Sanhedrin 108b-109a)", taking a positive attitude about any misfortune. The following story comes near the end of a long passage emphasizing how far one must go to be considerate of those who need charity.

Nahum, Ish Gamzo, was taking a gift to his father-in-law. A man afflicted with boils ran into him and said, "Deal kindly with me [and give me, through charity,] some of that stuff you have with you?" [Nahum] said to him, "When I return, [I shall give some to you]." But when he returned, he found the man had died. [Nahum] said to those who rebuked him, "May the eyes that saw you and did not give to you go blind. May the hands that did not extend to give [charity] to you be cut off. May the legs that did not run to give [charity] to you be broken." And so it came to pass. [One time] Rabbi Akiba came [to visit] him [Nahum]. [Rabbi Akiba] said to him, "Woe is me that I should see you in such [a state]!" [Nahum] said to him, "Woe is me that I do not see you in such [a state]!" [Rabbi Akiba] asked, "Why do you curse me?" [Nahum] said to him, "And why do you rebel against [Divine] punishment?" (Y. Peah 8:9, 21b // B.Hagigah 5b)

Nahum's suffering is not a punishment from God. Nahum brings these punishments upon himself in order to atone for his sin and ease some of his guilt. Nahum curses himself with blindness, and physical disabilities in his hands and feet. He does so following the principle midah k'neged midah, measure for measure. He does not, however, curse himself with deafness, muteness or mental illness; disabilities that would have stigmatized him in the sages' system. These are logical possibilities: he could have cursed his ears which did not hear, or his mouth that did not answer correctly, or his mind for not being more thoughtful.

The interchange between Rabbi Akiba and Nahum suggests that Rabbi Akiba does not yet understand the efficaciousness of sufferings in atonement and the importance of recognizing the principle of midah k'neged midah. Rabbi Akiba does, indeed, eventually understand this relationship because he suggests to another of his teachers, Rabbi Eliezer, on his deathbed, that sufferings are precious (Sifre D., Piska 32//B. Sanhedrin 101a). In addition, at the end of his own life, when he is most cruelly tortured to death, Rabbi Akiba recites the Shema, the ultimate testament of faith in Judaism (Y. Berachot 9:5, 13b // Y. Sotah 5:7, 20c // B. Berachot 61b) and explicitly states that he is not rebelling against suffering but is embracing it as a redemptive experience.

This story comments on the final mishnah in tractate Peah which serves as a theologically inspiring ending to the tractate. The gemara to this mishnah likewise forms the conclusion of the tractate and, as such, is meant to inspire righteous behavior that goes "above and beyond" the letter of the law. In other words, a minimum level of behavior can be legislated; desired behavior can only be encouraged through inspiring stories and the promise of great Divine rewards. Nahum Ish Gamzo, and of course Rabbi Akiba, were exceptional individuals who could achieve far greater righteousness, and bear far more suffering, than the average individual.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Rabbi Akiba react when he sees his teacher's state of suffering? Can you think of contemporary examples from the news or your personal world when you wanted suffering to end but the person suffering was satisfied with his/her state?

-
2. How does the Yerushalmi apply the principle of measure-for-measure in this story? How have you seen or experienced this principle in your own, or someone else's life?