

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

LIMBO IN THE YERUSHALMI

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The sages had very fluid ideas about the afterlife. There is a place of punishment called Gehinnom, i.e., Hell and a place of reward called Olam haba, i.e., the world to come. Heaven itself has seven levels and many different kinds of angels. There was one place in the afterlife that I thought Judaism did not have until I read about it in the Yerushalmi.

Limbo is a place in the Christian afterlife where people go who cannot get into Heaven but do not deserve consignment to Hell. The Yerushalmi tells us that we do have such a place and it even enumerates the people who go there:

The Rabbis of Caesarea said: The children of non-Jews and the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar's army [who were forced into service] are neither alive [in the World to Come] nor are they judged [and assigned to Gehinnom]. Regarding these people, Scripture says, "They will sleep an eternal sleep. (Jeremiah 51:57)"

In its place, in Jeremiah, God is telling the rulers of Babylonia that they are going to die, i.e., sleep an eternal sleep. But the sages appear to have mercy on the soldiers who were conscripted against their will. Likewise, children who were raised as idol worshippers and did not reach the age when they could have chosen Judaism shouldn't be held responsible for the sins they unknowingly committed.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think that the sages developed this notion of limbo because it developed in Christianity? (I know I'm asking you to speculate about historic ideas that, in scholarship, would not be allowed but I'm interested in what you think.)
2. Who else might be eligible for this Jewish "limbo"?
3. Limbo is a state that doesn't just relate to life after death. Personally, we are now in this liminal state with our children, waiting to hear from colleges and graduate schools. The applications are in. There is nothing else we can do but wait. It feels as if we are truly "betwixt and between". How have you coped with such periods in your life? What was it that put you in this limbo?

P.S. Pirkei Avot says, "Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone." Today, I was waiting for the checkout clerk said, "Happy new year and don't make any resolutions you know you're going to break." I thought that was real wisdom there. Happy secular new year!