

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted January 15, 2009, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING PASSAGE

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Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish are two of the most notable sages of the land of Israel. You will find them quoted together in literally hundreds of passages in midrash and the two Talmuds. So here's the mystery:

In the Bavli, Baba Metsia 84a, we find a very detailed story about the relationship between these two sages. Briefly told, Rabbi Yochanan "converts" Reish Lakish from a gladiator to a great sage. They are study partners and sharpen each other's learning through arguing, congenially one imagines, back and forth. But one day, Rabbi Yochanan steps over the line. Harsh words fly, Rabbi Yochanan is narcissistically wounded and, in essence, casts an evil eye on Reish Lakish who then dies. Rabbi Yochanan is then inconsolable. Eventually, the sages, to end his misery, pray that he dies, and he does.

This well-developed story is not found in the Yerushalmi. The only reference we have to it is this passage:

Rabbi Yochanan spent three and a half years without going to the House of Meeting because of his anguish over Reish Lakish's death. Finally, Rabbi Elazar saw in his dream: Tomorrow Sinai (Rabbi Yochanan's nickname) will come down and teach you something new.

Rabbi Yochanan went in and said before the students of the sages: How may we verify that the Temple service is to be carried out by the firstborn instead of by priests? We know it from this verse: "For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself. (Numbers 8:17)" And it is written, "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. (Exodus 12:12)" The Israelite firstborn were sanctified were sanctified at that time.
(Y. Megillah 1:11, 1:13)

Now, there are five major variant manuscripts of the Yerushalmi. This passage appears in only two of them.

So what are we to make of this mystery?

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the Bavli have such a detailed story when the Yerushalmi does not? It seems that the Yerushalmi knows about the tragic tale but we only hear about it indirectly, i.e., how Rabbi Yochanan recovers and returns

to the Study House. So why did the redactors of the Yerushalmi leave the story out?

2. Many times, when we have stories of sages arguing with tragic results in the Bavli, we find those same stories in the Yerushalmi composed with happy endings (e.g., the excommunication of Rabbi Eliezer or the return of Honi HaM'ageil). What do you think might account for this tendency?
3. Why do you think the teaching that Rabbi Yochanan returns to teach is about the firstborns offering sacrifices instead of the priests?

I'm really looking forward to your insights! Enjoy!