

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

PURIM: OUR MOST FLEXIBLE HOLIDAY

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Purim is the most flexible of all our holidays. There are Purim shpiels, and drinking and Purim carnivals. Even the day on which it's observed still floats around the way it did in the sages' day. In the Yerushalmi, very little about the holiday appears to be firmly nailed down:

"Gladness": On this basis we learn that it is forbidden to do labor on that day.

"Feasting": On this basis we learn that it is forbidden to do labor on that day.

"And holiday making": On this basis we learn that it is forbidden to do labor on that day."...

There is a story about Rabbi that shows he differs. For Rabbi would display his deeds in public on two days of the year. On the 17th of Tammuz he would go to a public bath and on Purim he would plant a tree. (Y. Megillah 1:1, p. 13)

This passage really rocked me back on my heels for two reasons. First, it would seem that the sages of the Yerushalmi agree that Purim is to be treated as a festival or as Shabbat in terms of working. It's not supposed to be done. And they adduce this from three different interpretations of these words in the Megillah: "They rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. (Esther 8:17 and 9:17)"

But then along comes Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the publisher of our Mishnah. He's not the sort of guy who is spoiling for a fight, but on two days of the year, he makes a public demonstration of his opinions. On Purim he does work, i.e., he plants a tree. And on the 17th of Tammuz, which commemorates the breaching of Jerusalem's walls, he goes to the public bath, one of the activities prohibited during a fast.

I find this a very interesting passage for a number of reasons, perhaps the most astonishing of which is that Rabbi loses with regard to the 17th of Tammuz. He wins on Purim: we are allowed to do work on that day. But he loses on the 17th of Tammuz: it is still a sunup to sundown fast.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Rabbi wins regarding Purim? If Purim were more like Shabbat and the festivals, how would it change the nature of the holiday?
2. Why do you think the 17th of Tammuz "stuck", notwithstanding Rabbi's disapproval? Is it easier for sad days to

stay on the calendar than it is for happy days? Is there some deeper psychological phenomenon that underlies these tendencies?

3. What do you think of Rabbi's idea of "work"? Any relationship to Tu BiShvat?

Looking forward to your insights! And happy Adar!