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"DUELING TEXTS"

Dear Friends,

Before we begin our passage, I'd like to tell you just a bit about our recent trip to Israel. Despite a sober atmosphere, life goes on for the people and the tourists in Jerusalem. People ride the buses, go to work, frequent restaurants and so forth. While there was a large military presence in town, it did not affect life and did not seem unusual in a country where so many people serve in the armed forces. I must say, as I saw the country recovering from the trauma, especially in the joyous Purim season, I thought a great deal about the texts we have been studying which deal with the tension between mourning and joy.

We were also privileged to visit Rabbi Steinsaltz's "Talmud Factory" and meet the staff of people who work with him in producing the volumes we are studying. It was tremendously exciting and uplifting to be with so many people for whom Talmud is such a vital and important enterprise. Meeting the people behind the words and seeing the environment in which they work gives me an even greater appreciation for their efforts.

Just one more note: we'll put up a special Pesach passage close to the holiday. Our best wishes for a happy, kosher Pesach!

At last, we are going to start into the Gemara on the Mishnah we've learned so far. This may call on you to switch gears mentally a bit. Remember, Mishnah is pristine and orderly while Gemara is much more interested in exposing many different aspects of a problem without necessarily settling on one point of view.

Some things you'll need to remember as you read:

1. As we've already learned, there was an ascending strategy of fasts in response to drought:

a. private, individual fasts,

b. then three public fasts,

c. three more public fasts,

d. a final series of seven fasts.

2. At this last series of fasts, we learned, they bring the ark out into the square, don ashes and recite a special series of prayers. Our Gemara is going to address the question of whether this is done on all the public fasts or just the last seven.

3. We have a general principle that we raise things in holiness and don't lower them (B. Shabbat 21b). We'll be learning a corollary here.

4. R'minhu--literally "(and) cast them". An expression used by the Gemara to introduce a contradiction between the source about to be cited and the source which has just been cited, where both sources are of equal authority. (Steinsaltz Reference Guide, p. 140)

B. Taanit 15b, Steinsaltz Volume 14, p. 12:

What is the order [of service] on fasts? They carry the ark out, etc." And even on the first ones?

A contradiction was raised (*R'minhu*). [On] the first and second three fasts, they go into the synagogue and they pray the way that they pray the entire year. And on the last seven [fasts], they carry the ark out to the open area of the town and they place ashes on the ark, and on the head of the Nasi and on the head of the president of the court, and each and every one [else] takes and places [ashes] on his head. Rabbi Natan says: They bring burnt ashes.

Rav Pappa said: When we learned our Mishnah also, we learned [it] with respect to the last seven.

"And on the head of the Nasi". And then it teaches: "Each and every one [else] places [ashes] on his head." Is this so? But surely it was taught: "Rabbi says: Regarding greatness, we begin from the greatest. And regarding a curse we begin from the least.

"Regarding greatness, we begin from the greatest, as it is said: 'And Moses said to Aaron and to [Aaron's sons] Eleazar and to Itamar (Leviticus 10:6).'

"And regarding a curse, we begin from the least, for first the serpent was cursed (Genesis 3:13-15), and afterward Eve was cursed (Genesis 3:16) and afterwards Adam was cursed (Genesis 3:17-19)!"

This is a distinction for them, for they say to them: You are distinguished [enough] to petition for mercy on behalf of the entire world.

More Thoughts:

"Dueling Texts"

The sages are unclear about whether the ark is taken out and the special prayers are said on all the public fasts or only on the last seven. Rav Pappa clarifies that it is only on the last seven fasts that these special procedures are enacted. One text is poised against another by this device, "*r'minhu*" and the question is then resolved. It's as if the Gemara is just giving you all the information you need to know how and why a decision is going to be made.

Ashes

Rabbi Natan notes that the ashes must be burnt ashes. Rashi suggests that this is to remind God of Isaac, and the mercy that was shown to him. Of course, as we've already noted, ashes are also instrumental in any number of purification rituals (e.g., the red heifer) and are that which is left in our hands after the sacrifices have been consumed. God receives the blood and spirit; we are left with ashes. This is all we are without God's enlivening presence.

Who Should Go First With a Difficult Task?

You'd think that the Nasi would be the last to have to undergo the ritual of the ashes. Yet here, we learn that it is his *privilege* to do so.

What is the rationale behind the explanation with Adam, Eve and the snake? If you take a look at Genesis 3:9-13, you see that God addresses Adam first and then Eve. God then curses the snake, Eve and Adam. The sages question why the order is not the same as in verses 9-13, I.e., Adam, Eve and then the snake. They explain it as stemming from punishing the lowest first, and so forth.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Gemara clarifies here that the special dramatic effects are to be used only on the last seven fasts. Sometimes the greatest drama and spiritual impact can be had by holding back and only on selected occasions, using a technique. When do you experience this in your life? Observing the restrictions of Shabbat? The dietary rules of Pesach? Whispering the second line of the Shema except on Yom Kippur?

2. What examples do you see in modern secular or Jewish life of "the least" encountering dishonor first and "the most

important" achieving distinction first? Are there times when it's warranted? When it's not?

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