

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted May 21, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### A MARRIAGE SEDER PLATE

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A student and friend of mine is getting married. I asked him what sort of gift he'd like expecting him to mention where the couple was registered. He surprised me by saying, "From you, I'd like something Jewish." This made my creative juices start to flow. Both bride and groom come from large Jewish families and I reasoned they'd probably receive at least 12 pairs of candlesticks. So to give them something special, I made them a "Marriage Seder Plate." (This name for it came from another one of my students, Diana Howard.)

It is made using a bento box (you can find them easily on the web). I filled each of the compartments with the following items:

1. A Swiss Army knife because of the saying: When love was strong, we could have made our bed on a sword-blade; now that our love has grown weak, a bed of sixty [cubits] is not large enough for us. (B. Sanhedrin 7a)
2. Barley with 36 pennies buried in it. The barley represents the minimum economic requirements for household harmony, as it is said: When the barley is quite gone from the pitcher, strife [between husband and wife] comes knocking at the door. (B. Baba Metsia 59a) The 36 pennies represent life (chai =18 in numerology) for both of them but also the wish that they have more than just subsistence in living; indeed, that they have enough to be able to give to charity.
3. Hershey's kisses. These represent the sweetness of Torah and the wish that they study it all their lives. (The candy is accompanied, outside the box, with two small Chumashim from which they may study.)
4. A myrtle branch. The myrtle is part of the lulav we wave on Sukkot. The sages tell us that it represents fertility:

Another exposition of the text, "the fruit of the hadar tree." Hadar symbolizes Abraham, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honored (hiddero) with good old age; as it says, "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age (Genesis 24:1)" and it is written, "And honor (vehadarta) the face of the old man (Leviticus 19:32)". Branches (kappot) of palm-trees" symbolizes Isaac who had been tied (kafut) and bound upon the altar. "And boughs of thick trees" symbolizes Jacob; just as the myrtle is crowded with leaves so was Jacob crowded with children. "And willows of the brook" symbolizes Joseph; as the willow wilts before the other three species, so Joseph died before his brothers.

Another exposition of the text, "the fruit of the hadar tree." Hadar symbolizes Sarah whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honored (hidderah) with a good old age; as it says, "Now Abraham and Sara were old (Genesis 18:11)." "Branches of palm-trees" symbolizes Rebecca; just as the palm-tree contains eatable fruit as well as prickles, so Rebecca brought forth a righteous man and a wicked one. "And boughs of thick trees" symbolizes Leah; just as the myrtle is crowded with leaves so was Leah crowded with children. "And willows of the brook" symbolizes Rachel; just as the willow wilts before the other three species, so Rachel died before her sister. (Leviticus Rabbah 30:10)

Great sages also used myrtle as a fertility symbol at weddings:

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai would take a myrtle twig and dance before the bride and...R. Samuel the son of R. Isaac danced with three [myrtle twigs]. (B. Ketubot 17a)

5. In the box's smallest compartment is kosher salt. This represents 3 things. (1) It represents keeping kosher and, by extension, all the customs and rules of keeping a Jewish home. (2) It represents the wish that all the Torah the family learns will be preserved in their memories. When we break bread (the staff of life = Torah) we dip it in the salt so that it will be preserved within us. (3) It represents tears for no matter how wonderful a marriage may be it will have moments of sadness.
6. One string of true tekhelet (available at <http://www.tekhelet.com/>) is enclosed in another compartment of the box. Tekhelet's most salient characteristic is that it never fades. You could wash it in bleach 5 times and it would not fade. This represents the presence of God in their lives and the constancy of their commitment to each other.

It is this sort of tekhelet that is mentioned in the Shema which we say three times each day (in the morning, in the evening and before going to sleep).

Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a thread of blue; And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, which incline you to go astray; That you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; I am the Lord your God. (Numbers 15:38-41)

7. Finally, a cup with a lid is meant to symbolize wine and water. In the sages' day, wine was sold as a concentrate and then diluted with water before drinking, usually using 1 part wine and 3 parts of water. Wine represents joy and God's presence not only in our lives but also in our very bodies:

Wine gladdens the heart of man (Psalm 104:14)

For laughter bread is made, and wine gladdens life, and money answers all things.  
(Ecclesiastes 10:19)

Water is a symbol of Torah:

Just as water endures forever, so do words of Torah live forever....Just as water cleanses the unclean of their unclean nesses, so do words of Torah cleans the unclean of their unclean nesses...Just as water restores a man's soul...so do words of Torah restore a man's soul...Just as water is forever free to everyone, so are words of Torah forever free to everyone...Just as water is priceless, so are words of Torah priceless. (Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 48)

### Discussion Questions:

1. What else would you put in a "Marriage Seder Plate"?
2. What are the things that make marriages last? And what are the things that may do a marriage in?