

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted July 7, 2006 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

FEELINGS ARE AS REAL AS OBJECTS: A STUDY OF THE OVEN OF AKHNAI STORY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, PART II **© Judith Z. Abrams, 2006**

The mishnah that we learned last time is the combination of two separate midrashim. We'll study the first of them this time. It is from the early midrash collection on Exodus called Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael on Exodus 22:20:

"Neither oppress (tonu) nor pressure a stranger (ger) for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)"

You shall not oppress him with words, neither shall you put pressure on him in money matters. Do not say to him, "Yesterday, you worshipped Bel, Kores [and] Nevo and until now pork was stuck between your teeth, and now [who are] you [to] stand up and to speak to me [about righteous behavior]!"

And from whence [do you know] that if you oppress him that he would be able to oppress you? [From the verse in] which it is said, "Neither oppress (tonu) nor pressure a stranger (ger) for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)" And from [this very verse] Rabbi Natan used to say [teaching]: "Do not mention to your fellow a defect from which you [also suffer]."

Beloved are the gerim for everywhere Scripture cautions [us] about them: "Neither oppress (tonu) nor pressure a stranger (ger) (Exodus 22:20)" "Love you therefore the ger, etc. (Deuteronomy 10:19)"; "For you know the soul of a ger, etc. (Exodus 23:9)" Rabbi Eliezer says: "[The] ger [is mentioned so many times in Scripture] because his original immoral condition [is still a factor] and therefore Scripture cautions [us] about him so much."

The midrash assumes that no word of Torah is superfluous which leads it to wonder why does it say "oppress" and "pressure". It must be because each word has a separate meaning. The midrash therefore assigns separate meanings to the two words: oppression with money and oppression with words.

The midrash then wonders why Torah warns us to be kind to the stranger (the same word that later means "convert") so very many times. It offers two logical possibilities: (1) because this is an important precept or (2) there is something dangerous about a stranger.

If you look at our mishnah, you'll see some of this midrash there.

Discussion Questions:

1. How often have you warned your children, or been warned yourself, about the danger of strangers? Does this make Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation of the verse a bit more palatable?
2. Why is it that what the midrash says is true: we are most troubled by those aspects in others that we most dislike in ourselves?