

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

Dear Friends,

This passage is a fitting one to study during the High Holiday season as it deals with sin and temptation. May the new year bring you sweetness, health and joy in the study of Talmud!

RABBI AKIBA AND SATAN

The sages were aware of how quickly trouble can brew when a man and a woman are alone. They therefore set down the following rules, in the Mishnah, about avoiding any situation that might lead to sin:

A man may not be alone with two women, but one woman may be alone with two men. Rabbi Shimon said: Even one man may be alone with two women if his wife is with him and he may sleep with them in an inn, because his wife watches him. A man may be alone with his mother and his daughter and he may sleep with them in immediate bodily contact. But when she grows up, she must sleep in her garment and he in his. (Mishnah, Kiddushin 80b)

These arrangements may seem backward to us but here is how the sages saw things: A man with two women might lead the man to have illicit intercourse with one (or both) of the women and neither would be strong enough, even when they combined their forces, to stop him. On the other hand, a woman could rely on the strength of one man to stop another man. (However, in subsequent law, a woman was deemed safe only in the presence of three men.) The mishnah then explores the idea of women for whom a man would presumably not feel desire, i.e., close relatives. However, even here, the sages recognize a possible temptation and decree that the daughter be fully clothed once she reaches the age of 9 years and a day and/or when she begins to feel embarrassed to be naked in her father's presence. These rules also apply to boys sleeping with their fathers. (B. Kiddushin 81b).

As part of its commentary on this mishnah, the Gemara brings a number of examples of sages who wrestle with temptation; among them, Rabbi Akiba.

Rabbi Akiba used to make fun of sinners. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the top of a palm tree. [Rabbi Akiba] grasped the tree and made his way up it. When he made his way half-way up [the tree Satan] let him go. He said [to Rabbi Akiba]: If they had not declared in heaven, "Be warned [about] Rabbi Akiba and his learning [which protects him]," I would have valued your life at two ma'ahs. (B. Kiddushin 81a)

A ma'ah was the smallest silver coin in the realm. So we can see that, had Rabbi Akiba not had his learning to protect him, Satan would have been able to exploit his weakness and kill him.

Satan is, in the Bible, not a proper name but a common noun meaning "an adversary who opposes and obstructs" (see "Satan", Encyclopedia Judaica). In rabbinic literature, Satan becomes identified with the Yetser Hara, the inclination to do evil, with which every person is born. Thus, Satan is not the source of evil. God creates everything and created every human being with a Yetser Hara. Indeed, the Yetser Hara is necessary for the continuation of life as we know it:

He [God] said to them [the sages]: See that if you kill him [the Evil Inclination], the world will fail. They imprisoned him [the Evil Inclination] for three days, then looked in the whole Land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it.

[Thereupon] they said: What shall we do? If we kill him, the whole world would fail. We [cannot] ask for half-mercy because Heaven does not give half mercy. They put out his eyes and let him go. (B. Yoma 69b)

The Evil Inclination is here quite literally embodied in the form of a human being. Killing him is impossible, as the world could not go on without sexuality and procreation and this is proved by the sages' experiment. God could not help the sages in this regard for prayers for half-mercy are not granted. Thus, it is left to the sages to disable the Evil Inclination by blinding him.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the fact that Rabbi Akiba yields to temptation make your opinion of him better, worse or unchanged? Why?
2. How do you define the Evil Inclination? How does it benefit you? How does it harm you? How could it benefit a community? How could it harm a community?
3. This teaching, that God does not grant half-mercy is found nowhere else in rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Tosefta, the Midrash collections, Yerushalmi or Bavli). Can you think of examples when half-mercy was given? What do you make of this teaching? Can you bring any modern analogies to shed light on your analysis?