

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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The musical was an enormous hit! If you'd like a dvd of the show, please send a [contribution](#) of \$18 for an enjoyable, entertaining and inspiring look at the world of the Talmud!

Posted October 24, 2008, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

HONESTY IN BUSINESS

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As the economy grinds to a standstill because too many people bought into something too good to be real, it might pay us to go back to the mishnayot in Baba Metsia about honesty in business. M. Baba Metsia 4:7-9 prohibits overreaching in terms of people's feelings (the mishnah you may know because, in the Bavli, Rabbi Eliezer's excommunication is attached to it) and in business. Here, the Yerushalmi gives us a more lenient take on the prohibition against beautifying one's wares in order to make a sale. The Mishnah prohibits deceptive practices but the Gemara allows a merchant to put their good in the best possible light.

Rabbi Avdima, from Milcha, would steep his lean meat in water to improve its appearance. Said to him Yaakov bar Ahah, "Was it not taught, 'One doesn't deceive by beautifying merchandise'?" From the words of Yaakov bar Ahah we can learn that the prohibition of beautifying applies to food. R. Zeira who worked with flax came to Rabbi Abahu. He said to him: May I beautify my work? Said Rabbi Abahu to him: Go and do what you know [i.e., act according to your understanding of the law]. Rabbi Abahu was weaving veils. He came and asked Rabbi Yose ben Hanina and said: What can we do with these veils? He said to him: Go and do what you know [i.e., act according to your understanding of the law]. Rabbah painted a bath red to beautify it. Rabbi Yaakov Amsonya taught: What does it mean, "One doesn't deceive by beautifying merchandise"? That one doesn't paint one's body. (Y. Baba Metsia 4:7)

The brevity of the Yerushalmi's comments here, especially when compared with the length of the Bavli's parallel passage, is remarkable. Only the very last sentence of all three mishnayot (i.e., M. Baba Metsia 4:9) seems to be explored. Some brief cases of law are cited, liberalizing the degree to which one can beautify one's merchandise

Discussion Questions:

1. The Mishnah clearly prohibits deception but the Yerushalmi seems to allow more leeway in terms of showing one's goods off in the best light. Where is the line between deception and proper practice? In what way were the adjustable mortgages and loans against mortgages not proper practice?
2. If we were to crystallize the wisdom we have learned about taking on too much debt into a Mishnah of our time, how might a few of those mishnayot read?

Enjoy!