

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

Making the Journey Through Illness a Journey Through Heaven (continued)

Dear Friends,

We continue our study of making the journey through illness a journey through heaven. Having passed through the phase of preparation (see the last web page's material) we now venture into the first two levels of heaven and illness. Pictures of the curtains should be available in the next few weeks.

Too, thanks for your support of Maqom. Your generosity is greatly appreciated.

God bless you!

Cordially,

Judy Abrams

Step One: Entering The Border Between Day and Night the initial symptoms

The first set of curtains represents the first level of heaven, called vilon in the Talmud (B. Hagigah 12b) It is dark blue velour and covered with birds, which we associate with the daytime sky, and stars, which we associate with the night sky; visible only when the sunlight retracts to reveal the heavenly bodies been there all along. In addition, birds are often a symbol of the soul rising above earthly cares. Indeed, Israel is often likened to the dove who can only protect itself through flight and, by analogy, can only gain divine protection through observance of the commandments (B. Berachot 53b).

The first experience we have of illness can be likened to the flight of a bird and to the distant fire of the stars. When we first experience symptoms, we want to retreat, to fly away, to deny. "It's not that serious. It's just an ache or a pain or a lump. It will go away. I don't need to see a doctor yet." Already, a new experience, an experience that was always there, waiting, is being revealed to us as the stars wait for daylight to be pulled back from the sky at sunset. This is a realm where our previous identity, whatever it was, is no longer valid; a strange world in which suns become stars; the near becomes far and what was so normal and taken-for-granted-health-becomes a distant dream, as out-of-reach as the flight of birds.

This level of heaven is like the aspect of Torah that is fire. The beginning of the journey through sickness is like fire: the searing of pain, the burn of fever. But fire melts metal and gives it use and form. Fire transforms raw materials into steel and glass. Fire turns raw food into cooked and purifies

Why are the words of the Torah likened to fire? This is to teach you that just as fire does not ignite of itself so too the words of the Torah do not endure with him who studies alone. (B. Taanit 7a)

The day and night skies are connected by the fiery sky of sunrise and sunset. So, too, are words of Torah the ones that

elevate our souls, allowing them to fly like birds and shine like the stars.

Step Two: The Sun, Moon and Stars and the diagnosis

The second set of curtains represents the second level of heaven, called rakia. It is a royal blue cloth peachskin polyester, beginning to show the progression from darkest blue (the first panel) that will make the transition all the way to white representing the purity of the highest heaven in the last panel. This level of heaven is the home of light: the sun, the moon and the stars. The notions on this level are crystals, acting as prisms of light and showing how the light of Torah is reflected in our lives.

The path of learning, of Torah, represented in this level of heaven is that of light. Torah is frequently likened to light, as far back as Scripture:

"Light" surely means Torah, as it is said, "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching [Torah] is a light. (Proverbs 6:23)" (B. Taanit 7b// B. Megillah 16b // B. Sotah 21a // B. Baba Batra 4a)

Light is the means by which we are seen and by which we see. Sight is not only a physical sensation but a metaphor for enlightenment. The following passage from rabbinic literature shows how the light of Torah functions on many levels:

Rabbi Yose said: All my days I was perplexed by this verse, "And you shall grope at noonday as the blind gropes in darkness. (Deuteronomy 28:29)" Now what difference does it make to a blind man whether it is dark or light? [I did not find the answer to this question] until the following incident occurred.

One time, I was walking on a pitch black night when I saw a blind man walking in the road with a torch in his hand. I said to him, "My son, why do you carry this torch?" He said to me, "As long as I have this torch in my hand, people see me and save me from the holes and the thorns and the briars." (B. Megillah 24b)

This story is a parable which may be understood in the following way. The torch in the story is the Torah. The blind person is the person who learns Torah, but does not understand what he or she has learned. The light of Torah which one internalizes protects and sheds light on others even when one doesn't fully sense its light. If one learns Torah, and honor it (i.e., hold it high) you become a light to others, and those others, guided by that light, guide the torchbearer when he or she is blind.

When we are granted a vision of, or from, God, we are not literally "seeing". There are many ways of internalizing light: vision may be the most obvious, but not the most potent, way. Just so, using our intellect may be the most obvious way to learn Torah, but certainly not the only, and maybe not even the best, way. We can treasure it by reading it, singing it, memorizing it, studying it and letting it affect our lives. All these kinds of learning lend honor to the individuals who perform them and to the communities in which they reside.

When we have broken down and seen a doctor, the physician pronounces a diagnosis. (Little do we know, yet, what a tentative business diagnosis can be. We do not know, at the beginning of our journey, how often this diagnosis may change and how certain each physician may be that their diagnosis is the correct one.) We feel enlightened and in control. There is an order to what is happening to us, even if it's an order we don't want. What we have has a name, it is known, it has a known trajectory and, perhaps, a treatment and a cure. We feel as if light has been shed on a confusing situation and that we understand ourselves and our bodies. We do not know, at this point, that we are only beginning the journey and that this enlightenment will prove temporary.

Discussion Questions

1. The sages say that old age and illness were brought into the world by the Abraham, Jacob and Elisha to help us

prepare for death.

Until Abraham there was no old age; whoever wished to speak to Abraham would speak to Isaac, and the reverse. Thereupon he prayed, and old age came into existence, as it is written, "And Abraham was old and well-stricken in age.(Genesis 24:1)"

Until Jacob there was no illness: then Jacob came and prayed, and illness came into being, as it is written, "And one told Joseph, Behold, thy father is sick.(Genesis 48:1)"

Until Elisha no sick man ever recovered, but Elijah came and prayed, and he recovered, for it is written, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died, (II Kings 13:14)' thus proving that he had been sick on previous occasions too, [but had recovered]. (B. Baba Metsia 87a //B. Sanhedrin 107b)

Abraham looked so young that everyone confused him with Isaac. Therefore, he asked for old age so that folks could tell the difference between them. Jacob did not want to die without preparation and so asked to become sick so that he could prepare himself for death. Elisha brought the possibility for healing into the world. According to the text, up until Elisha's time, people became sick and never recovered.

How are old age and sickness blessings as well as curses? Is it a greater blessing to be able to be sick and then recover or would it be better if the only illness was the last one? In a broader vein, we might ask, "How is there an aspect of curse in every blessing and the aspect of blessing in every curse?"

2. Diagnosis is one of the most important, and perhaps most difficult, steps in the process of healing. Authorities dating all the way back to the Torah placed a high premium on the skills that could allow a person to differentiate between a mere pimple and leprosy.

The ability to name an entity, be it a disease or an angel or a relationship, is testified to throughout Jewish texts. To put it simply, "What's in a name?" What about a specific diagnosis can help the sufferer? How might a diagnosis hurt a sufferer? If we can think about this beyond the medical world, how does naming things free us? How does it limit us?