

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 8, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

MORE OF HILLEL'S MYSTERIOUS TEACHINGS

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2004

Over the past few lessons we have been focusing on Hillel and his more mysterious (and lesser known) teachings. Here are two more that relate to Hillel's systematic teachings on reciprocity.

And so Hillel used to say: When you see that the Torah is beloved to all Israel and all rejoice in it, then you must spread it about. And if this is not the case, then you must gather it in. (T. Berachot 6:24//Y. Berachot 9:5)

Hillel the Elder said:

Do not appear naked
do not appear standing
do not appear sitting
do not appear laughing
do not appear weeping

Because Scriptures says: "A time to weep, a time to laugh...a time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing. (Ecclesiastes 23:4-5)" (T. Berachot 2:21)

The first teaching is fairly straightforward. If Torah is valued, one should teach it. But if the audience does not value Torah then it is incumbent on the sage not to present the Torah to their scorn. It is too precious to be given to people who give it little or no respect.

The second teaching is somewhat more obscure. The literal translation I have given, above, leaves out the usual way this Tosefta is explained. Most commentators take this teaching to mean that if one is in a place where others are dressed, one shouldn't appear naked. If they are standing, one shouldn't sit and if they're sitting one should stand, etc. In other words, one should conform to current practice in any given place or situation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are these two teachings related to each other, philosophically? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Do you agree with these teachings? Should we try to interest people in Torah if they haven't shown any interest?
3. How do these two teachings compare with those we learn about Hillel's coming to Israel from Babylonia and declaring that he knew how to do things properly while the natives there did not (B. Pesachim 66a//Y. Pesach 6:1)?
4. BONUS QUESTION: Why might these questions be recorded in Tosefta and not Mishnah or the midrash collections? Were they suppressed in those earlier documents? Did Hillel have an unnamed champion of his teachings in those 20 years between the codification of the Mishnah and the Tosefta?