

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

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

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Step Three: Manna, Wine and Blood, Treatment

The next level of heaven we symbolically enter is called sh'chakim. This is where the heavenly millstones stand and grind mannah for the righteous. On a light blue ultrasuede curtain, the mannah is depicted descending from heaven. The manna was a divinely provided sustenance offered to the Israelites as they wandered in the desert (Exodus 16:13-36). It was said to be like coriander seed, white and tasted like wafers in honey (Exodus 16:31).

The form of Torah we contemplate at this level is the Torah as wine. One of the most profound effects illness may have on us is that we may become disfigured during this process. The passage from rabbinic literature which likens Torah to wine has deeply affirming words for those who no longer fill society's definition of beauty: we may be better vessels of wisdom because of our wounds.

Just as these three liquids [milk, water and wine] can only be preserved in humble vessels, so the words of Torah endure only with him who is meekminded. This is illustrated by the story of the daughter of the Roman Emperor [Hadrian] who addressed Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, "O glorious Wisdom in an ugly vessel". He said, "Does not your father keep wine in an earthenware vessel?" She asked, "Wherein else shall he keep it?" He said to her, "You who are nobles should keep it in vessels of gold and silver." Thereupon she went and told this to her father and he had the wine put into vessels of gold and silver and it became sour. When he was informed of this he asked his daughter, "Who gave you this advice?" She said, "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya." Thereupon the Emperor had him summoned before him and asked him, "Why did you give her such advice?" He replied, "I answered her according to the way that she spoke to me." But are there not good-looking people who are learned? If these very people were ugly they would be still more learned. (B. Taanit 7a-b)

In our society, outer beauty is often equated with inner loveliness. According to the Talmud, the Torah which is like wine is corrupted by outer beauty. By becoming liberated from preset definitions of beauty, illness may actually free us to find the spiritual, intellectual and emotional beauty within ourselves.

We live in a time of great miracles in medicine. There are treatments for so many things that would have killed or debilitated our grandparents. Antibiotics, heart bypasses, laminectomies, antidepressants, medications and more medications. Truly, these are manna from heaven. There is so much to rejoice in when we think of what modern treatments can give us. Cancers that would have killed twenty years ago can now be contained and even cured. Fractured hips can be replaced. For all the difficulties we may face when dealing with the modern medical care system, let us say it loud and clear, "We are grateful, so grateful, for what can be cured, for the pain that can be relieved, for the years of life we are given that previous generations could never have hoped for." Think through your own family history. Surely, there were grandparents or great-grandparents of yours who died of influenza, of pneumonia, of childhood fever, of measles, of polio; horrible diseases which we need no longer fear. For this, we need to be appropriately and continually thankful.

Step Four: The Heavenly Jerusalem, Iron and Tests

The next level of heaven we metaphorically enter is called zevul: the home of the heavenly Jerusalem. This curtain is made of light blue challis. On a blue ribbon, a metallic-looking tassel extends, suspended from a gold rope. It is much like a rope by which one might ring a bell and gain admittance to a palace or a strand up which one might climb to heaven.

In this level of heaven, the angel Michael who represents Israel before God, offers sacrifices on a heavenly altar which corresponds to the one which stood here on earth in the Temple. The concept that earthly institutions had heavenly corollaries can be seen in this passage:

Rav Nahman said to Rabbi Yitshak: What [is the meaning of what] is written [in Scripture], "The Holy One is in your midst and I will not come into the city (Hosea 11:9)." [Surely it cannot be that] because the Holy One is in the midst of you I shall not come into the city! He said to him: Thus said Rabbi Yohanan: The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'I will not enter Jerusalem above until I can enter the Jerusalem below.' Is there then a Jerusalem above? Yes, for it is written, "Jerusalem, you are built as a city that is compact together. (Psalm 122:3)" (B. Taanit 5a)

While Israel is in exile, and the earthly Jerusalem destroyed, God voluntarily goes into exile as well, waiting for Jerusalem to be rebuilt and for the cult to be reinstituted. The verse from Psalms can be taken to mean that the earthly Jerusalem has a companion Jerusalem in the heavens. The exposition in the Bavli here seems to depend on the words in Psalm 122:3, shechubrah la yachdav, which could loosely be expounded to mean "together with its companion".

The following text explicitly makes the connection between the processes of judgment on earth and what in heaven:

R. Abbahu was bereaved. One of his children had passed away from him. R. Jonah and R. Yose went up [to comfort him]. When they called on him, out of reverence for him, they did not express to him a word of Torah. He said to them, "May the rabbis express a word of Torah." They said to him, "Let our master teach us." He said to them, "Now if in regard to the government below, in which there is no reliability, [but only] lying, deceit, favoritism and bribe-taking, which is here today and gone tomorrow, [if concerning that government] it is said, 'And the relatives [of the felon] come and inquire after the welfare of the judges and of the witnesses, as if to say "We have nothing in our hearts [against you], for you judged honestly (M. Sanhedrin 6:6)" in regard to the government above, in which there is reliability, but no lying, deceit, favoritism, or bribe-taking, and which endures forever and to all eternity, all the more so are we obligated to accept upon ourselves the just decree [of the heavenly government].'" (Y. Sanhedrin 6:12, 23d-24a)

This passages, like others, shows how the sages envisaged the reciprocity of what is above and below. The sages, and ancient Israelites, believed there was a connection between heaven and earth which found its corporeal link in the Temple was remarkably long-lived, being given expression in our earliest and latest sources. The sages, with their study, filled the vacuum in this connection created by the Temple's destruction. Both priests and sages operated in a metaphorical sense, cognizant not only of the audience before them, but of the audience above them, as well. It is in this context of the connection between heaven and earth that the priest's physical perfection, and the sages' understanding of it, must be examined.

This idea that physical reality is mirrored in a spiritual sphere is related to the identity of Torah with iron. Torah study, like physical healing, is not a solitary process, but is one of connection between souls and between earthly and heavenly spheres:

"Iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17)". This is to teach you that just as in the case of one [iron] iron sharpens the other so also do two scholars sharpen each others mind by [studying Jewish] law. (B. Taanit 7a)

The graphic presentation on this curtain reveals the blue of higher heavens, as we ascend through the sky toward God. In addition, it schematically demonstrates the connection between our souls and bodies here on earth and their heavenly reflections through the ties from lower to upper realms.

When our situation, medically, is complicated, we enter the world of tests. This goes beyond the simple blood draw to

which we may have become accustomed. We enter a frightful world, made all the more frightful because no one will admit that it is frightful. This experience of multiple tests is frightening, disheartening and depersonalizing. The tests themselves are often unpleasant. But more than that, if one's situation isn't easily nailed down, one may be referred to one physician after the next and each has their own test they want to perform. They do this not out of maliciousness but out of the hope that their one test will reveal the problem in all its complexity. However, the patient's life is taken over by arranging for these tests, taking them and waiting for the results.

Each time we go, often to the hospital, for one of these tests, we are like supplicants going to the Temple. Instead of an animal, however, we bring ourselves as sacrifices and enter realms where the technical is everything, just as it was in the Temple. The tests, moreover, are taken mostly in silence, just as the sacrifices in the Temple were performed in silence. Both represent a moment of truth and, for the journeyer, a hope that this will make things clear; will release us from the grip of what is beginning to feel like a malevolent demon.

Discussion Questions

1. Does physical beauty prevent us from developing spiritual beauty? In what ways is it a hindrance? In what ways does physical beauty help us develop spiritual beauty?
2. How is studying in community or in hevruta preferable to studying alone? How does a study community "sharpen" you? How does it soften you?
3. R. Abbahu extrapolates from an earthly example to the heavenly realms. Do you find his homily intellectually satisfying? Is it emotionally satisfying? Spiritually? How can his friends serve as a role model for us when we are with someone suffering great pain?