

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 27, 2006 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

GOT MIRACLES?

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Our passage, from Pirkei Avot, not only talks of the Omer (which we are now counting, moving us from Passover to Shavuot) but also of all the ways in which things could have gone wrong during the sacrificial service....and did not.

Ten miracles were done for our fathers in the Sanctuary:

1. No woman miscarried from the scent of the sacrificial meat.
2. The sacrificial meat never became putrid.
3. No fly was seen in the slaughterhouse.
4. No unclean accident ever happened to the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.
5. The rain never extinguished the fire of the woodpile [on the altar which was under the open sky].
6. No disqualifying defect was ever found in the Omer [of new barley offered on the second day of Passover]
7. [No disqualifying defect was ever found] in the two loaves [baked of the first fruits of the wheat harvest and offered up on Shavuot or in the show bread [which was changed weekly, on Shabbat].
8. Though people stood closely pressed together they found ample space to prostrate themselves.
9. Never did a serpent or scorpion do injury in Jerusalem.
10. No one ever said to his fellow: I have no place to lodge overnight in Jerusalem. (Pirkei Avot 5:7)

We can learn much by inference from this mishnah. Even if the sacrificial meat never became putrid, the smell must have been terrible...enough to make a pregnant woman miscarry. Natural miracles, such as the fire never going out (and those who have been in Israel during the winter months can testify that the rain could well have put out the fire) and no scorpions hurting anyone, would be well outside the ordinary.

There must have been a constant process of inspection to make sure that none of the offerings had any defects. The accident with the High Priests must have referred to seminal emission as we have a record of a High Priest becoming impure because someone speaking with him on Yom Kippur inadvertently spit on him (T. Kippurim 3:20). The story there is interesting because his brother was the "reserve High Priest" and so their mother got to see both her sons officiate as the High Priest on Yom Kippur, apparently her highest aspiration.

The town, and particularly the Temple compound, must have been crowded beyond description.

This gives us a realistic picture of Jerusalem in the days of the Temple.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think it was more of a miracle that there were no defects in the grain and bread offerings than in the animal offerings? Have you ever encountered any such kind of miracle?

2. If we imagine that these miracles did take place, what do they say about the sacrificial system when it stood?
3. Is there anything in this idea of the sacrificial system you'd like to see return? If so, what?