

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE POOR ... BUT NOT POOR ENOUGH!

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Mishnah Peah 8:8 states that a person who has 200 zuz, i.e., enough to live on comfortably for a year, may not take communal charity money for support. But the mishnah also states that if a person has 199 zuz, he should take communal support.

Now remember that the Mishnah is promulgated by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, aka Rabbi. Rabbi is a very wealthy man but he clearly appreciates that a person could be living on the very edge of poverty and might need help keeping out of ruin. It is in this context that we find this story:

A student of Rabbi possessed two hundred zuz, less a single dinar. On account of that one dinar he lacked, Rabbi used to allow him to collect the poorman's tithe during the third year of each Sabbatical cycle.

The other students took a dim view of this seeming favoritism, and gave him the one dinar he lacked. When Rabbi again wanted to allow him to receive the poorman's tithe, the student said to him, "Rabbi, I have the full amount, the two hundred zuz, so I cannot collect poor-offerings."

Rabbi replied: They made a hypocritical, Pharisaic gesture of piety toward you! (Rabbi thereby warned his other students against such behavior.) At any rate, Rabbi took his poor student to a tavern and drank him one qaret poorer, and then granted him the right to receive poorman's tithe, just as he always had done. (Y. Peah 8:8)

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi understands what some of his students apparently do not: you can be perilously close to not making it financially. It is a mitzvah to help a person feel some security and move them to a place where poverty is not pinching them morning, noon and night. This is a subtle understanding of charity and is certainly on the "books", so to speak, halachically. Do you think this is logical/reasonable? Why or why not? Now that you know this, will you take it into account when you do your charitable giving?
2. Rabbi certainly knows how to manipulate the tax laws...and in such a menschlichkeit way! He takes the student out for a drink! This is another aspect of charity done well: it has a human touch, a touch of concern for the recipient's personhood. It is difficult to accept charity. Rabbi understands this. However, there seems to be a bit of tension about this student. Is Rabbi showing favoritism? What is going on here that the other students are so

upset and jealous? What are the psychodynamics here?

3. This is not the only place in rabbinic literature which tells us that it is better to help a person who is struggling to stay independent than to help a person who has fallen into complete destitution (e.g., B. Baba Metsia 60b). Do you agree with this "triage" of needy persons? If so, why? If not, why not?