

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted June 22, 2006 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

FEELINGS ARE AS REAL AS OBJECTS: A STUDY OF THE OVEN OF AKHNAI STORY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, PART I

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One of the most famous stories in rabbinic literature is one concerning Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua and a dispute they had concerning a certain oven. In the Bavli, the story is in the gemara to this mishnah:

Just as there is hurting with money, so is there hurting with words. [How does one hurt another person with words?] Don't say to a merchant: How much is this? if you don't want to buy. And if a person was a repentant sinner, don't say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. And if he was the child of converts, don't say to him: Remember your ancestors' deeds, as it is said, "For you were strangers (gerim, which also means converts) in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20). (M. Baba Metsia 4:10)

This mishnah turns up in a chapter concerning honesty in business. Obviously, it moves well beyond the realm of business. Hurting someone's feelings, particularly by causing them to remember things that should, by rights, properly be forgotten is just the same as overcharging someone for merchandise.

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you write a modern-day gemara on this mishnah, particularly the part that involves "window shopping"? Does this mishnah apply in a web-based economy? Does not the merchant benefit from people looking at his/her website, even if they do not wish to buy? Does such an economy encourage people to covet? How would you update this mishnah?
2. How should we properly "forget"? When is the statute of limitations up for a sin someone has done (or their parents have done)?

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