

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted July 20, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

WHAT DO WE REALLY NEED? (PART II)

Our last passage examined the Yerushalmi's ideas about what a town must have for it to be acceptable for human habitation. Now, we turn to the Bavli's ideas on the subject.

The Bavli's comments come in the commentary to this mishnah:

How many [inhabitants] should a town have that it might be eligible to have a [small] sanhedrin (i.e., 23 judges)? One hundred and twenty? (M. Sanhedrin 1:6)

The discussion here concerns how many inhabitants a city must have for it to play host to a relatively large court, i.e., 23 judges. The judges, of course, would be sages. Thus, in its commentary to this mishnah (the last in the first chapter of Sanhedrin), the Bavli rules that a scholar can live only in a city with the following characteristics:

A Torah scholar is not permitted to dwell in any town which does not have these ten things in its midst:

A court which flogs and punishes,
A charity fund which is collected by two and distributed by three,
A synagogue,
A bathhouse
An outhouse
A doctor,
A bloodletter,
A scribe,
A slaughterer
And a teacher of young children.

In the name of Rabbi Akiba they said: Also varieties of fruit of varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes. (B. Sanhedrin 17b)

According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, (a) this list applies to all Jews, not just Torah scholars (b) the court must have real authority, i.e., be able to punish, instead of a relatively powerless committee of three people (c) the charity funds must be collected by two people so there will be no suspicion of embezzlement and (d) there are so many needy persons that a town needs a committee of three people to assess each case and administer the aid which is needed.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of the Bavli's list of necessities? How does it differ from the Yerushalmi's? Is this closer, or farther away from, your list of necessities for a modern city?
2. Why do you think this passage was paired with this mishnah?