

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BLESSINGS FOR BUSINESS

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We all have to deal with some aspect of business ethics every day, whether it's deciding fiscal policy for a country or toying with the idea of picking up a piece of fruit and eating it while shopping in the grocery store. Indeed, the first question a person is asked when they arrive in the World to Come is, "Were you honest in business?" (B. Shabbat 31a). (Check out the other five questions at http://maqom.com/aug16_2002.html.)

The Talmud of the Land of Israel (the Yerushalmi) offers us many benedictions regarding business and business ethics that are not found in the Bavli (the Babylonian Talmud).

R. Haggai and R. Jeremiah went to a [grocery] store [to inspect its scales for accuracy]. R. Haggai eagerly recited a blessing [over this obligation to examine the scales. He said the blessing: Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to sanctify the weights and scales and to establish the measures.] R. Jeremiah said to him, "You have acted very well. For blessings must be recited for the performance of all the commandments. (Y. Berachot 6:1)

The Yerushalmi offers some unique blessings to be said when one is making the best of a bad situation:

If one's wine turned to vinegar, he says: Blessed is the true judge.
If he goes to drink it, he says: [Blessed is God, etc....] for all came into being by his word.
If one saw locusts, he says: Blessed is the true judge.
If he goes to eat them he says: [Blessed is God, etc....] for all came into being by his word.
If one saw fruit that did not ripen, he says: Blessed is the true judge.
If he eats them he says: [Blessed is God, etc....] for all came into being by his word. (Y. Berachot 6:3)

The blessing, "Blessed is God, etc....for all came into being by his word" is the blessing one can say over any type of food, from locusts to steak. The blessing, "The true judge" is one that is said when any misfortune befalls a person.

The Yerushalmi even posits what should be said when good and bad outcomes result from the same event:

If they told someone his father died, he recites: Blessed...the true judge.
If someone's father died and he inherited his estate he [also] recites: Blessed...who is good and does good." (Y. Berachot 9:2)

For financial loss:

To one whose slave or animal died you say to him, "May God restore your loss." (Y. Berachot 2:7)

Up until now, we've looked only at blessings. But what about prayer in a business setting? You are not allowed to ask for miracles in a business setting (or in hardly any other setting, for that matter).

One may not utter vain prayers such as "magically double this harvest" but one may pray that what he brings in may be for a blessing and not for a curse [i.e., that it should not spoil, cf. M. Berachot 9:3] (T. Berachot 6:7)

Discussion Questions:

1. I believe that if you want to know a person's true character, observe them when they don't think anyone is watching, e.g., while they are shopping in a grocery store. Do they eat fruits as they walk around rather than waiting and paying for them? Do they pay for things they broke? I know that's a tricky question because if you tell the store manager s/he'll insist that it's ok for you not to pay. But is it? Do they go into the "Ten Items or Less" lane with 13 items? Where else can you "catch" people being themselves? What do you learn?
2. The sages demand that we bless God for both the good and the bad in our lives. Are you able to be thankful for the bad things that happen to you or to those you love? Or do you think the blessing is meant to be an acknowledgment that there is only one God and it is this God that meets out justice and mercy alike?
3. Have you ever asked God for a miracle? What happened?