

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 1, 2005 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

JUDAISM IS EVERYWHERE: BETHESDA, BETHEL AND BETHANY

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When people say they're searching for Judaism I feel somewhat puzzled. Judaism is everywhere! You just need to adjust your vision to see it...something like the experience of going to the optometrist and deciding which is clearer, "lense one or lense two".

For example, I greatly enjoyed seeing and reading the play "Angels in America" by Tony Kushner. At the very end many of the principle characters are sitting at a fountain in Central Park which is called the Fountain of Bethesda. The characters in the play speak of a tradition that links the pool of Bethesda in Second Temple Jerusalem with a healing ritual which will be revived in the messianic era.

Now, every time you see "Beth" and something else you should think, "Beit" "House of" _____ ; fill in the blank. For example, Bethlehem is Beit Lechem, "House of Bread." Bethany is Beit Oni, House of Poverty and Bethel is Beit El, House of God. So when I looked at the name Bethesda, especially in the context of a healing ritual, I tried to think what "Ezda" might be but nothing obvious came to mind. Luckily, I own a version of Christian Scriptures in Hebrew and was able to look up the mention of it in John 5:2-4. There, in the Hebrew/Aramaic, the name was written **בֵּית חַסְדָּא** , Beit Chasda, The House of Lovingkindness.

It turns out that these waters were in two pools north of the Temple complex called the Sheep Pools. The lower of the two pools was probably used for washing sheep which were then sold for sacrifices at the nearby Temple. Excavations have revealed that, indeed, a health rite took place there during the Roman period. It seems that the waters there spontaneously moved around and perhaps people thought that an angel was causing this to occur. It is remarkable that this imagery has survived all the way into the 21st century.

Discussion Questions:

1. Many Jewish movements and institutions have what they call "Outreach" committees, seeking to bring people closer to Judaism. Perhaps they should turn this in its head and "Reach Out" and touch the almost endless products of Judaism that pervade our culture and society. What do you think? Would this be effective in helping people connect with Judaism? For example, what if a Jewish "Reach Out" committee stationed itself at this fountain in Central Park and taught about its Jewish roots?
2. What symbolism do moving waters have for you (e.g., in ancient Jerusalem or modern day fountains)? Why do you think they might be associated with healing? Do you ever use fountains for healing purposes? If so, how?
3. The Naval Hospital and the National Institutes of Health are located in a near suburb of Washington, D.C. called Bethesda. What do you think came first? Did the name of the town inspire institutions of healing to be built there or were the institutions built and then the town was named Bethesda?