

Talmud Passage of the Week

Party All Night Long!

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 10/08/96).

BH

Dear Friends,

Greetings! I hope you have an easy fast and a meaningful Yom Kippur. This week's passage is about the joy that comes at the end of Sukkot. I urge you to read the Gemara to this mishnah (B. Sukkah 51bff) because it is truly interesting and has a large unit of material on the Evil Inclination. Enjoy!

Mishnah Sukkah 5:4, Bavli Sukkah 51a-b

He who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life. At the conclusion of the first festival day of Sukkot they [the priests and levites] descended to the court of women where they had made a great enactment. There were there golden candlesticks with four golden bowls on the top of each of them and four ladders to each and four youths drawn from the priestly stock in whose hands were held jars of oil containing 120 *log* [168 liters]. From the worn-out drawers and girdles of the priests they made wicks and with them they kindled the lamps. And there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illumined by the light of the place of the water drawing.

Men of piety and good deeds used to dance before them with lighted torches in their hands and sing songs of praise. And Levites without number with harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and other musical instruments were there upon the fifteen steps leading down from the court of the Israelites to the court of the women, corresponding to the fifteen songs of ascents in the Psalms. It was upon these [steps] that the levites stood with their instruments of music and sang their songs. Two priests stood by the upper gate which leads down from the court of the Israelites to the court of the women. With two trumpets in their hands, when the cock crowed they sounded a teki'ah, a teru'ah and again a teki'ah. When they reached the Tenth step they sounded a teki'ah, a teru'ah and again a teki'ah. When they reached the court they sounded a teki'ah, a teru'ah and again a teki'ah.

Background

The Water Drawing Ceremony

The water drawing ceremony (described in the mishnah, Sukkah 48a-b) involved pouring out water into a bowl from a special decanter (see Rabbi Steinsaltz's Hebrew version, p. 201 for a picture of this vessel). There were two decanters, one for wine and one for water. It was such an important ceremony that, when it was once done incorrectly, the priest who made the mistake was pelted with the congregation's etrogs!

The bowls of oil (see Rabbi Steinsaltz's Hebrew, p. 215 for a picture) were something like the Olympic flame of modern times: lights so large they could turn night to day. In fact, this whole ceremony is based on turning everything on its head. Night becomes as bright as day. The underwear of the priests usually hidden underneath other clothes and hidden inside the Sanctuary, are turned into the wicks. The Court of Women, usually just a holding area for people

making sacrifices up on the Sanctuary level, becomes the focus of the ritual. Men of piety and good deeds, who are usually supposed to be extremely circumspect in their behavior dance about like children. Such rituals are called, by anthropologists, rituals of rebellion. When a culture has strict role definition (as was certainly the case in the Temple) then one occasionally must have ritual ways of relieving the tension that these roles engender, often by ritually reversing everything. Perhaps this ceremony, and its attendant levity, provided this release.

Songs of Ascents

The Psalms that begin "Shir Hama'alot", "A Song of Ascents" had their real life context in the Temple. We have these fifteen songs because there were fifteen steps. There were probably more, but they were not preserved for us.

The Shofar Blasts

In Taanit we have been reading about the shofar blasts associated with the fast. Here we read about them on a day of great joy.

Discussion Questions

1. In Taanit, the shofar blasts seem somewhat alarming. Here, they are part of the joy, dancing and music of the night and calling people to, perhaps, the calmer atmosphere of day. Contrast the use of the shofar in this ritual with the use of the shofar during the fast rituals we have studied. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. Is the joy of Sukkot/Shemini Atseret the counterpoint to the solemnity of the Days of Awe? How is Sukkot a reversal, a rebellion, against Yom Kippur? How is Sukkot related to the fasts we have studied in Taanit? What is the role of water in all of this (e.g., it is used to purify, to sustain life, it is poured out of vessels as rain pours out of the sky)?