

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 27, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

### HOW ELEMENTAL CAN YOU MAKE JUDAISM?

We all know that there are 613 commandments. But that's pretty much an Olympic gold standard. Today there are many mitzvot which we cannot perform since there is no Temple or that are simply no longer performed. For example, almost all of the laws of ritual purity have been abandoned even though the laws regarding them are the most voluminous in the Mishnah (i.e., tractate Tohorot).

So, accepting the idea that approaching the observance of 613 mitzvot is a long-term, probably unachievable goal, let's take the opposite tack and find out how to begin observing mitzvot. Our passage from the Bavli comes in the commentary to this mishnah:

If in the case of blood for which man's soul has a loathing, anyone who refrains therefrom receives reward how much more so in regard to robbery and incest for which man's soul has a craving and longing shall one who refrains therefore acquire merit for himself and for generations and generations to come, to all generations! Rabbi Hananياهو b. Akashia says: The Holy One blessed be He, desired to make Israel worthy, therefore God gave them the law [to study] and many commandments [to do]: for it is said: "The Lord was pleased for his righteousness' sake to make the law great and glorious. (Isaiah 42:21)" (M. Makkot 3:16)

This mishnah is different than most mishnayot. It comes at the end of a tractate having to do with punishing transgressors. The compositors of the Mishnah often end tractates on an uplifting note. A tractate of such grim character might need it all the more so. So here it is explained that refraining from transgression garners great reward and that God gave us the laws not to entrap us but to glorify us.

Within that framework, then, comes a remarkable piece of Gemara in which the sages show how the mitzvot can be summed up in the broadest of categories:

Isaiah (33:15-16) came and reduced the (essential mitzvot) to six, as it is written:

1. He walks righteously and
2. Speaks uprightly
3. He despises the gain of oppression
4. That shakes his hand from holding bribes
5. That stops his ear from hearing blood
6. And shuts his eyes: he shall dwell on high...

Micah (6:8) came and reduced them to three, as it is written, "It has been told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you:

1. Only do justly
2. Love mercy
3. Walk humbly before your God.

"To do justly", that is maintaining justice. "And love mercy" that is rendering every kind office. "And walking humbly before your God": that is, walking in funeral and bridal processions. (B. Makkot 24a)

First, the quote from Isaiah is brought to show that personal righteousness is the essence of the mitsvot. Micah, on the other hand, is interpreted as taking part in the community: making sure that justice is done, charity is handed out responsibly and that rights of passage are duly marked.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. On a philosophical and personal basis, with whom do you agree more, Isaiah or Micah?
2. This is the only way this verse from Micah is used in rabbinic literature. How else might it be used? Try using it as a meditation: Breath...do justly. Breath...love mercy. Breath...walk humbly.
3. If you could summarize what it means to be a good Jew, what would you say?
4. Explain why this piece of Gemara is brought to explain this mishnah.