

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 28, 2006, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

DON'T WEAR YOUR FINEST THIS YOM KIPPUR

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2006

I know it's the custom in many communities to come to services in one's finest clothing. But to do so would be flaunting the teachings of generation after generation of sages. For example, we learn in that funeral expenses became so expensive that people abandoned their families' corpses. Finally, Rabban Gamliel, one of the wealthiest of the sages (a veritable Vanderbilt) reversed the trend:

At last, Rabban Gamliel came forward and, disregarding his own dignity came out in shrouds of flax [instead of the more expensive wool]. And nowadays all the world follow the practice of being buried in a paltry shroud that costs less than a zuz (the smallest coin). (B. Moed Katan 27b)

Unfortunately, the urge to splurge continued through the centuries and rabbis in every era fought this ostentation, as in this decree from 1637 in Lithuania:

With respect to banquets: inasmuch as people are spending too much money unnecessarily on festive meals [at marriages, circumcisions, etc.], every Jewish community and settlement which has a rabbi is expected to assemble its officers and rabbi and to consider the number of guests which it is suitable for every individual, in view of his wealth and the occasion, to invite to a festive meal. No one is permitted to come to a banquet unless he has been invited by the beadle. In a settlement where there is no rabbi the nearest Jewish court will enact such an ordinance for them. Lithuania, September 4, 1637 The Jew in the Medieval World, Jacob Rader Marcus, Temple Books, 1979, pp. 194-196

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do people spend conspicuously? What purpose does it serve for them?
2. What is the best way to stop this behavior? Is it up to the richest people to set the example? If so, how can we get them to do this?
3. Will you make a conscious effort to downsize your future event, be it a bar/bat mitzvah, wedding, birthday or other celebration? How?

May you have a meaningful fast!