

Talmud Passage of the Week

Party All Night Long!

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 10/22/96).

BH

"Let's Do the Time Warp Again!"

Dear Friends,

Greetings! We are finally coming back to Ta'anit after our long break. Most of you wanted to continue rolling through Ta'anit, so that's what we're going to do. I'm glad we'll be able to resume our "regularly scheduled program", as it were, after all the holidays.

One other thing: this month's Lillith Magazine contains a poster of Jewish Women's history. The founding of Maqom last year is on their timeline! Thanks Lillith!

Bavli Ta'anit 16b-17a, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 29-30:

"Rabbi Yehudah says: It is not necessary to say Zikhronot, etc." Rabbi Adda of Yaffo said: What is the reason of Rabbi Yehudah? Because we do not say Zikhronot and Shofarot (17a) except on Rosh Hashanah and in the Jubilee Years and in time of war.

For the first he says: "He who answered Abraham, etc." [A Tanna] taught: "There are those who exchange "crying " to Elijah and "prayer" to Samuel. Granted that regarding Samuel "prayer" is written and "crying is written. But regarding Elijah, "prayer" is written, [but] "crying" is not written! "Answer me, O Lord, answer me" is an expression of "crying".

For the sixth he says: "He who answered Jonah, etc." For the seventh he says: "He who answered David, etc." Now, since Jonah lived after David and Solomon, what is the reason that he places him first? Because he wishes to end: "Who has mercy on the land." [A Tanna] taught: "In the name of Summakhos they said: Blessed [are You, o Lord,] who humbles the exalted.

Background

Zikhronot and Shofarot

Zikhronot and Shofarot, long blessings which you just heard on Rosh Hashanah, are only said on that day, Yom Kippur, the Jubilee year, which comes once every fifty years after 7, seven-year Sabbatical year cycles. (Every seventh year the land of Israel rests in what is called a Sabbatical year. At the end of seven such cycles, all the land reverts back to the tribes who originally owned it and this year is called the Jubilee year.) We blow the shofar in war because of the following verse: "And if you go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresses you, then you shall blow an alarm with the trumpets, and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God and you shall be saved from your enemies. (Numbers 10:9)" The themes of these prayers were not considered germane to a day devoted to praying about a drought, so Rabbi Yehudah recommends leaving them out.

Praying and Crying

With regard to Samuel and Elijah and their praying and crying, the Gemara is relying on different prooftexts. Samuel is described as praying: "And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mitspah, and I will *pray* for you to the Lord. (I Samuel 7:5)" And Samuel is also depicted as crying, "And Samuel *cried* to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord heard him." Elijah is described as saying to God, "Answer me, o Lord, answer me (I Kings 18:37)" and this is seen by the Gemara as both a prayer and a cry. Thus, the "seals" of the prayers are interchangeable. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, a cry demands an immediate response from God.

Before and After

The Gemara next asks, "If Jonah lived after Kings David and Solomon, why does the blessing about him come first? Shouldn't they be in chronological order?" The answer is no. Rabbinic literature sometimes sees biblical events in a sort of time warp, or dream, in which there is no before and after as we think of linear time. It can be similar to a dream in which you are in the world of your childhood but you are an adult. In this case, then, the need of the liturgists to end with a blessing about mercy on the land is more important than chronological order.

Variant Texts

Now, for the seventh blessing, we have two possible "seals": "Who has mercy on the land" or "who humbles the exalted". Both are directly on point as to the amelioration, and drastic effects of, the drought. What is most important here is that there is a variant text which reads not "*mashpil haramim*", "Who humbles the exalted" but "*mashpil umeirim*", a very slight change which renders the phrase, "Who humbles and elevates". The Talmud was transmitted through hand-copied manuscripts and variants such as these are quite important.

Discussion Questions

1. Which reading of the seal do you think is most appropriate to the liturgy for a fast day, "humbles and elevates" or "humbles the exalted"? Why?
2. The first time we have the root *tsadi-ayin-kuf* in the Tanach is in this verse: "The voice of your brother's blood cries unto Me from the ground. (Genesis 4:10)" By way of contrast, the first time the root *peh-lamed-lamed* (prayer) is used is a much less personally charged situation: "And Avraham prayed to God and God healed Avimelekh and his wife and his maidservants; and they bore children. (Genesis 20:17)". Which seals do you think belong with which prophet? Is Samuel or Elijah more likely to cry? To pray?
3. Note once more the fluidity of the liturgy and the great latitude given those composing it and praying it. How could you recapture and make use of this fluidity today?