

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted October 12, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

BECOMING AN ADULT GRADUALLY

The mitsvah of waving the lulav is one of the most enjoyable in Judaism. The sages expected that children would know how to wave it before they reached the age of legal majority in Jewish law (12 or 13). So the question arises, "When should a minor be allowed to wave the lulav? The mishnah's answer is clear:

A minor who knows how to wave it is obligated [to perform the commandment of] the lulav. (M. Sukkah 3:15)

If the child knows how to wave the lulav he is obligated to perform this commandment. Both the Yerushalmi and Bavli further explore what it is that a minor should be taught to do according to his development. They base their comments on T. Hagigah 1:2:

[If] a minor knows how to wave [it] he is obligated [to wave] the lulav.

[If] he knows how to wrap himself [in a tallit] he is obligated to wear tsitsit (fringes)...

[If] he knows how to guard his tefillin [boxes containing holy texts which are worn], his father procures tefillin for him....

[If] he knows how to slaughter, his slaughtering is valid....

[If he can eat] an olive's worth of roast meat, they slaughter a Paschal offering on his behalf.

Rabbi Yehudah says, They should never slaughter a Paschal offering on his behalf unless he knows, [how to] distinguish food [from what is not food]. What is "distinguishing food"? Anyone who, when they give him an egg he takes it [and eats it and they give him] a stone and he throws it away. (T. Hagigah 1:2)

This tosefta gives considerable flexibility to acknowledge the difference at which children develop. And, more importantly, as they develop they are included in the adult community. There are six year-olds who can do calculus and adults who can't add. This tosefta is saying, "Recognize and value each person's gift when it appears and validate it with true status within the community."

The last segment about recognizing food will be familiar to anyone who has, or had, a toddler. At one point, they'll put anything in their mouths. Eventually, they begin to recognize what is food and what is not. It is at this point that a part of the Passover sacrifice is apportioned for them.

Discussion Questions:

1. This tosefta seems to provide a remarkably flexible scale for treating children as adults. What advantages and/or disadvantages do you find in such a system?
2. Today, we seem to make children wait until after they become bar or bat mitsvah before we allow them to participate in Jewish ceremonial life as adults. This tosefta advocates the opposite: that as children mature, their abilities should be recognized and counted as valid. Why do you think tradition "hardened" around bar/bat mitsvah? Do you think we should return to the system Tosefta advocates?