

PART 13: THE SYNAGOGUE [TRACTATE BRACHOS 8A-B]

by Rabbi Dr. Azriel Rosenfeld

R. Abba said, all agree that Israel's redemption from Egypt began in the evening (1), as it says: "G-d took you out of Egypt at night" (Deut.16:1),

R. Levi said: a person who has a synagogue in his city and doesn't enter it to pray is called a bad neighbor, as it says "All My bad neighbors who affect My people's inheritance (1)" (Jeremiah 12:14); in addition, he causes exile for himself and his children, as it says "I will displace them from their land" (ibid.).

R. Yochanan was surprised to hear that there were old men in Babylonia, since it says "So that your days will be multiplied in the land" (Deut.11:21) -- a special blessing when one resides in the Land of Israel, but not outside it. But when he heard that they come early and stay late in the synagogue (2), he said that this accounted for it. He quoted R. Yehoshua b. Levi, who advised his sons to come early and stay late in the synagogue so that they would live long. This can be derived from the verse "Happy is the man who listens to Me, who comes quickly to My doors daily, to guard the doorposts of My entranceways, for he who finds Me has found life" (Prov.8:34-35) (3).

Rav Chisda said, a person should go two doors' distance into the synagogue before praying (4).

"Every pious person should pray to You for a time of finding" (5) (Psalms 32:6). R. Chanina said, "for a time of finding" refers to a wife, as it says "He who has found a wife has found goodness" (Prov.18:22). R. Nosson said, it refers to Torah, as it says "For he who finds me has found life" (6) (Prov.8:35). R. Nachman the son of Yitzchak said, it refers to death, as it says, "there are many paths to death" (Psalms 68:21). R. Yochanan said it refers to burial.

"G-d loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (Psalms 87:2): this implies that G-d loves gates that are distinguished ("Metzuyanim") (7) in Halacha (practical application of Torah principles) more than synagogues or houses of study (8). Since the Temple was destroyed, G-d has in His world only the four cubits of Halacha (9). Abaye used to study at home and pray in a synagogue, but after he heard this he prayed where he studied; similarly, R. Ami and R. Asi had 13 synagogues in Tiberias, but they prayed only between the pillars (10) where they studied.

A person should live in the same place as his teacher, for as long as Shimi son of Gera was alive, Solomon didn't marry Pharaoh's daughter (11). But he shouldn't live where his teacher lives if he doesn't defer to his teacher (12).

A person who subsists from his own efforts is greater than one who fears Heaven; regarding the latter it says "Happy is the man who fears G-d" (Psalms 112:1), but regarding the former it says "If you eat by the efforts of your hands, you will be happy and it will go well with you" (Psalms 128:2) -- "happy" in this world and "well" in the world to come (13).

FOOTNOTES:

(1) The word "inheritance," in the simple meaning of the verse refers to the Land of Israel, but on a deeper level, it alludes to synagogues outside of Israel, which, according to the Talmud (Megillah 29a) will all be moved to the Land of Israel when the Messiah comes (See Maharsha, Brachos 8a).

(2) That is, they come early for morning prayers, and stay late after evening prayers; in other words, they prolong the time that they are present in the synagogue.

(3) One who spends time in the synagogue finding G-d, will find life. The words "coming quickly to My doors," refers to coming early for morning prayers, and "to guard the doorposts" refers to staying late after evening prayers.

(4) According to the Jerusalem Talmud (Berachos 5:1), G-d rewards a person for each extra step he takes in a synagogue. Others explain that this is instructing a person to wait the amount of time it would take to walk the width of two doors before beginning to pray, in order to settle his mind.

(5) In other words, one should pray that when one needs something, one will find it.

(6) According to the simple meaning, it is the concept of wisdom (i.e. Torah) doing the talking in this verse; that chapter of proverbs begins with the words: "Surely wisdom will cry out...near the gateways of the city..."(Proverbs 8:1).

(7) The word "Tziyon" ("Zion") can be read "Tziyun", which means a distinguishing mark. The "Shaar" (gate) of a city was often the place where a rabbinical court sat to determine matters of Jewish law.

(8) There are houses of study ("Batei Midrashos") where, although people are studying the Torah, they are not capable of applying the theoretical principles of the law to an actual situation that might arise.

(9) The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where the Jewish people related most intimately to G-d; the Midrash seems to be suggesting here, that after the destruction of the Temple, it is only the Torah scholar toiling to understand and apply the truths of existence, who achieves a relationship that resembles the connection that was possible when the Temple stood.

(10) That is, the pillars of the study hall.

(11) Marrying Pharaoh's daughter had many negative consequences, and the Midrash is deriving from the juxtaposition of events in the book of Kings (see I Kings 2:46 and 3:1), that living close to his teacher, Shimi, made Solomon reluctant to marry her. It was only after his teacher died that Solomon

went ahead with the marriage.

(12) The punishment for sinning after hearing warnings from one's teacher and ignoring them, is greater than the punishment for sinning without hearing those warnings.

(13) It seems that both types of people referred to here are G-d fearing; the only difference is that one is earning his own living, and the other is not (knowing the reason that this person is dependant on others is not important here). The Medrash is teaching us the extra benefits accruing to one who earns his own way.

This class is dedicated to the refuah shleima of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.

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