

CHAPTER 4, LAW 2(B) - THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Among them (i.e., the twenty four factors which interfere with repentance listed in this chapter) are five things which lock the path of teshuva (repentance) before those who do them. They are:

(a) One who separates from the community, since when they repent he will not be with them and he will not benefit with them in the merits they do.

(b) One who disputes the words of the sages, for his dispute will cause him to separate from them and he will not know the ways of repentance.

(c) One who makes fun of the mitzvos (commandments), because since they are degraded in his eyes he will not run after them nor will he do them. And if he does not do, how will he gain merit?

(d) One who disgraces his Torah teachers, for this matter causes them to reject (lit., 'push away') and banish him, as Yeshua and Gehazi. And once he is banished he will not find one who will teach and instruct him in the true path.

[Note: The final example I will translate G-d willing in the next installment.]

In the last class we discussed some of the examples in the Rambam of actions or behaviors which make repentance very difficult. We talked about the danger of separating from the community and good influences. We also discussed the evil of the Biblical figure Gehazi, servant of the Prophet Elisha. This week we turn to another errant student of the Sages -- Yeshua, AKA Jesus.

Last week I quoted the Talmud which in two places (Sotah 47a and Sanhedrin 107b) states as follows: One should always push away with his left while drawing close with his right -- i.e., never push away the sinful too strongly, unlike Elisha, who did so to Gehazi or R. Yehoshua ben Perachia, who did so to "one of his students" -- i.e., Jesus.

As an aside, the Talmud in Sotah uses the purposely oblique phrase "one of his students." In Sanhedrin the Talmud explicitly refers to Jesus by name ("*Yeshu HaNotzri*," *Notzri* = Nazarene, which is why Christians are called "*Notzrim*" in Hebrew today). Further, my father's edition of the Talmud (c. 1950) omits both passages, thanks to censorship. My own Talmud (1970's) does not contain the story in Sanhedrin with its explicit reference but does contain the passage in Sotah. Even today, not all editions of the Talmud include the Sanhedrin version, although of course it is readily available in print.

As a second important aside, the Talmud actually makes remarkably little reference to Jesus and

Christianity. There are perhaps half a dozen references to him in the entire Talmud -- a work which talks about almost everything else under the sun. I once heard R. Berel Wein explain that this is for the simple reason that the Babylonian Talmud was written far from Christian influence. They did not live among Christians and had little reason to comment about or respond to them. Thus, although the Talmud has been painted as a very anti-Christian book by our enemies throughout the ages (as well as, somewhat contradictorily, a work which admits to Jesus as Messiah), the Sages for the most part had little reason to stick their necks out, so to speak, and make condemnatory statements about competing religions.

Anyway, finally turning to our partially-censored text, the Talmud records as follows. There was an incident in which the Hasmonean King Yannai killed off many Torah scholars (because of a debate regarding his pedigree). R. Yehoshua ben Perachiah and his students fled to Alexandria. When stability returned he and his students returned to the Holy Land. On their return they stayed at a certain inn. The hostess gave them exceptionally good service. R. Yehoshua commented, "How nice is this matron!" His wayward student, misunderstanding his teacher's intent, responded, "My teacher, her eyes are round." The rabbi responded, "Wicked one! This is what you are dealing with?!" He placed him in excommunication.

Jesus returned to his teacher many times to plead for forgiveness. R. Yehoshua repeatedly refused to accept him (drawing the Talmud's criticism that one should never push away too strongly). One day the student came to the rabbi when he was praying and could not respond. He signaled Jesus to stay, for that day he was prepared to accept him back. Jesus, however, misunderstood the gesture and left, at that point severing himself from Judaism entirely.

There are two very important messages contained in this brief episode. On the one hand, Jesus's initial remark could have been seen as an innocent misunderstanding. Something else, admittedly less noble, came to his mind when his teacher said "how nice is this woman." Perhaps an innocent mistake. Very few of us see an attractive woman and not even notice her looks.

But there is a great message here, one of the profoundest of the Torah. Judaism teaches us that a human being can sanctify himself in this world -- physically. The Torah and G-d's wisdom can sublimate a man to such an extent that his very body becomes holy, no more than a utensil for serving G-d. A man who studies Torah can grow to a degree that he can see a beautiful woman and not instantly view her as an object, something to be desired. R. Yehoshua saw a woman with an attractive exterior but praised her for her true worth. Likewise, a devoted Jew can enjoy the pleasures of this world without being driven away from spirituality. He will rather appreciate the G-d who has granted man such in His wonderful world and be drawn ever closer to Him as a result.

And this is the lesson Jesus missed -- and in fact is one that Christianity and other great religions grapple with to this very day. I know I'm oversimplifying -- and as always, I'm not here to knock other religions, but other religions often view the physical world as something to be eschewed. The truly

holy person sequesters himself in a monastery or ashram, celibate and poor, isolated from the evil world of man without.

Judaism has never seen this as an ideal or even something to be encouraged. We are to live in this world and sanctify it. We enjoy the blessings G-d has granted us and pray daily for comfort and physical sustenance. Certainly the Torah limits what we may enjoy and there are times for abstention and doing without. Yet one of the great messages of the Torah is that our physical side and the physical world in general are not here to be quelled or ignored. They were not created only to tempt us away from G-d. Everything in G-d's creation is ultimately purposeful and can and must be used to sanctify His Name. And people as great as R. Yehoshua can relate healthily to the physical world, without risk of being overcome by it.

There is a second great lesson contained in this story. The last time Jesus returned to his teacher, R. Yehoshua was prepared to accept him back. There was a misunderstanding and it didn't happen. Point number one is that we must not blame R. Yehoshua for indirectly spawning Christianity. Although the Talmud does fault him for being too harsh, he knew when enough was enough. He would not have gone **too** far; it was G-d who willed it to happen.

Yet, G-d willed a misunderstanding to occur at that critical moment. For some reason, G-d willed it that such a mishap occur and a false religion be born. Compare also a cryptic passage in Talmud Chagigah (4b) that Mother Mary was supposed to die young, but that they "made a mistake" in heaven and took the wrong Mary.

And the message here is a fascinating one. Did they actually make a mistake in heaven? Should the Talmud be taken literally? I don't know. But that's the not point of the Talmud. Its message is rather that by rights, G-d would have never allowed such a course of events to transpire. A religion that doesn't (quite) believe in the oneness of G-d with over 2 billion adherents today? By the normal standards of Divine providence, such would have never occurred. G-d would not have allowed it. There have been many, many false messiahs in Israel over the millennia. Very few have amounted to anything or have been heard of since. Even if charismatic, they were all generally dismissed as ignoramuses, crackpots or eccentrics (all of which can easily be mistaken for a powerful mystic), at most exciting some of the unlearned rabble. But this one time was different.

Why did G-d allow it? Yet another fascinating message emerges. On the one hand, we might view it as tragic that so many people today believe in a false messiah and have a skewed understanding of theology. But there is a greater truth behind this. Two billion people -- and in fact another one and a half billion if we count Islam -- believe many of the basic tenets of Judaism. Sure, according to us they have several of the details wrong, but they believe in an all-powerful loving G-d, reward and punishment, the afterlife, almost all the moral teachings of Judaism, the forefathers of Israel, the story of the Exodus, the Revelation at Sinai, G-d's selection of the Children of Israel and granting of the Holy Land to them, and the arrival of the Messiah.

And when that great day arrives -- when the true Messiah does come, a considerable portion of the world will be prepared. They have already accepted virtually all the premises of Judaism. It will not be so great a leap to understand and accept the rest (see Rambam, Laws of Kings 11:4).

So yes, G-d works in mysterious ways. At times, what ordinarily should not be, is. G-d appears to allow terrible setbacks in man's quest to discover Him. Yet the pieces are slowly falling into place. The vast majority of the Torah's message -- utterly foreign and strange to ancient and to classical man -- has now become axiomatic to the civilized world. (Regarding just how foreign, see Aish.com.) Western society today regards and cherishes the Judeo-Christian values upon which it is based. And thus, the world is being readied. G-d willing, the day will soon arrive in which "I will then convert the nations to a clear tongue for all of them to call in the name of G-d, to serve Him united" (Zephaniah 3:9). We see the millennia-long stages of history coming together, the pieces falling into place. We await the finale.

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