

The Most Important Talmudic Passages
Classes 5 and 6 – Study vs. Work; The Spiritual vs. the Physical
Melton Gesher at JCC – November 7 and 14, 2012
JSI at Beth Torah – November 8, 2012
JSI at Temple Emanuel, June 19, 2013

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, page 35b

Our Rabbis taught: “And thou shall gather in thy grain.”⁶ What is to be learnt from these words? Since it says, “This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth,”⁷ I might think that this injunction is to be taken literally. Therefore it says, “And thou shall gather in thy grain”, which implies that you are to combine the study of them⁸ with a worldly occupation. This is the view of Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says: Is that possible? If a man plows in the plowing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah? Rather when Israel perform the will of the Omnipresent, their work is performed by others, as it says. “And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks. etc.”⁹ and when Israel do not perform the will of the Omnipresent their work is carried out by themselves, as it says, “And thou shall gather in thy grain”. Nor is this all, but the work of others also is done by them, as it says. “And thou shall serve your enemy etc.”¹⁰

Said Abaye: Many have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael, and it has worked well; others have followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and it has not been successful. Raba said to the Rabbis: I would ask you not to appear before me during Nisan and Tishri¹¹ so that you may not be anxious about your food supply during the rest of the year.

6 Deut. XI, 14.

7 Joshua I, 8.

8 Sc. the words of the Torah.

9 Isa. LXI, 5.

10 Deut. XXVIII, 48.

11 Nisan being the time of the ripening of the grain and Tishri of the vintage and olive pressing.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, pages 33b – 34a

Rebbi Yehudah, Rebbi Yose, and Rebbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehudah ben Gerim, was sitting beside them. Rebbi Yehudah commenced [the discussion] by observing, ‘How fine are the works of this people! They have made market-places, they have built bridges, they have erected baths.’ Rebbi Yose was silent. Rebbi Shimon bar Yohai answered and said, ‘All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges, to levy tolls for them.’ Now, Yehudah ben Gerim went and related their words, which reached the government. They decreed: Yehudah, who exalted [us], shall be exalted, Yose, who was silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris; Shimon, who disparaged, let him be executed.

He and his son went and hid themselves in the Beth Hamidrash, [and] each day his wife brought him bread and a jug of water and they ate. [But] when the decree became more severe he said to his son, Women are of weak temperament: she may be subject to torture and expose us.’

So they went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob-tree and a spring of water were created for them. They would strip their garments and sit up to their necks in sand. The whole day they studied; when it was time for prayers they went and robed and covered and went forth and prayed, and then put off their garments again, so that they should not wear out. Thus they dwelt thirteen years in the cave. Then Eliahu came and stood at the entrance to the cave and exclaimed, Who will inform bar Yohai that the emperor is dead and his decree annulled?

So they emerged. Seeing a man plowing and sowing, they exclaimed, 'They forsake eternal life and engage in temporal life!' Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, 'Have ye emerged to destroy My world: Return to your cave!'

So they returned and dwelt there twelve months, saying, 'The punishment of the wicked in Hell is [limited to] twelve months.' A Heavenly Echo then came forth and said, 'Go forth from your cave!' they went out.

Wherever Rebbi Eleazar smote Rebbi Shimon healed. Said he to him, 'My son! You and I are sufficient for the world.' On the eve of the Sabbath before sunset they saw an old man holding two bundles of myrtle and running at twilight. What are these for?' they asked him. 'They are in honor of the Sabbath,' he replied. 'But one should suffice you?' He said, 'One is for 'Remember' and one for 'Observe'.'* Said he to his son, 'See how precious are the commandments to Israel.' [Thereupon their minds were set at ease.]

Rebbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir his son-in-law heard [thereof] and went out to meet him. He took him into the bathhouse and massaged his flesh. Seeing the clefts in his body he wept and the tears fell from his eyes and hurt him [Rebbi Shimon]. 'Woe to me that I see you in such a state!' he cried out. 'Happy are you that you see me thus,' he retorted, 'for if you did not see me in such a state you would not find me thus [learned]. For originally, when Rebbi Shimon bar Yohai raised a difficulty, Rebbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir would give him twelve answers, whereas subsequently when Rebbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir raised a difficulty, Rebbi Shimon ben Yohai would give him twenty-four answers.

Since a miracle has occurred, said he, let me go and fix something, for it is written, and "Ya'acov came whole [to the city of Shechem]",** which Rav interpreted to mean - Bodily whole [sound], financially whole, and whole in his learning. "And he was gracious to the city".*** Rav said: He established coinage for them. Shmuel said: He established markets for them; Rebbi Yohanan said: He established bathhouses for them. Is there ought that requires fixing? he asked.

There is a place of doubtful impurity he was informed, and it causes trouble for the priests to have to go around it. Said he: Does any man know if there was a presumption of cleanness here? A certain old man replied, Here and there ben Azai cut down lupines of terumah. So he did likewise. Wherever it (the ground) was hard he declared it clean, while wherever it was loose he marked. Said a certain old man, bar Yohai has declared pure a cemetery! Said he, Had you not been with us, even if you have been with us but had not voted with us, you might have spoken well. But now that you were with us and voted with us, it will be said, [Even] whores paint one another; how much more so should scholars! He cast his eye upon him, and he died.

Then he went out into the street and saw Yehudah ben Gerim: 'That man is still in the world!' he exclaimed. He cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones.

*Ex. XX, 8. Remember the Sabbath day; Deut. V, 12: Observe the Sabbath day.

**Gen. XXXIII, 18

***Va-yihan is thus derived from 'hanan', to be gracious. The simple meaning is – “and he encamped before the city”.

Midrash Breishit Raba 78, 9

9. AND ESAV RAN TO MEET HIM... AND KISSED HIM (XXXIII, 4). The word is dotted. Rebbi Shimon ben Eleazar said: Wherever you find the plain writing exceeding the dotted letters, you must interpret the plain writing; if the dotted letters exceed the plain writing, you must interpret the dotted letters. Here the plain writing does not exceed the dotted letters, nor do the dotted letters exceed the plain writing: hence it teaches that he kissed him with all his heart. Said Rebbi Yannai to him: If so, why is the word dotted? It teaches, however, that he wished to bite him but that the Patriarch Ya'acov's neck was turned to marble and that wicked man's teeth were blunted and loosened. Hence, AND THEY WEPT (ib.): one wept because of his neck and the other wept because of his teeth. Rebbi Abbahu adduced it in Rebbi Yohanan's name from the following verse: Thy neck is as a tower of ivory (S.S. VII, 5).

Midrash Sifrei Beha'alotcha 69

“And he kissed him” – the dots indicate that he did not kiss him with complete sincerity. Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai says – it is a well known halacha that Esav hates Ya'acov rather his compassion was aroused at that time and he kissed him with complete sincerity.