

Men and Women in the Talmud  
Sexual Temptation  
Melton Gesher at the JCC – October 24, 2012

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 127b

Our Rabbis taught: It happened that a certain pious man ransomed an Israelite maiden [from captivity]; at the inn he made her lie at his feet. On the morrow he went down, had a ritual bath, and learnt with his disciples. Said he to them, When I made her lie at my feet, of what did you suspect me? We thought, perhaps there is a disciple amongst us whose character is not clearly known to our Master. When I descended and had a ritual bath, of what did you suspect me? We thought, perhaps through the fatigue of the journey the Master was visited by nocturnal pollution. By the [Temple] Service! exclaimed he to them, it was even so. And just as you judged me favourably, so may the Omnipresent judge you favourably.

Our Rabbis taught: The scholars were once in need of something from a noblewoman where all the great men of Rome were to be found. Said they, Who will go? I will go, replied Rabbi Yehoshua. So Rabbi Yehoshua and his disciples went. When he reached the door of her house, he removed his tefillin at a distance of four cubits, entered, and shut the door in front of them. After he came out he descended, had a ritual bath, and learnt with his disciples. Said he to them, When I removed my tefillin, of what did you suspect me? We thought, our Master reasons, "Let not sacred words enter a place of uncleanness". When I shut [the door], of what did you suspect me? We thought, perhaps he has [to discuss] an affair of State with her. When I descended and had a ritual bath, of what did you suspect me? We thought, perhaps some spittle spurted from her mouth upon the Rabbi's garments. By the [Temple] Service! exclaimed he to them, it was even so; and just as you judged me favourably, so may the Omnipresent judge you favourably.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kidushin page 81a

Certain [redeemed] captive women came to Nehardea. They were taken to the house of Rav Amram the pious, and the ladder was removed from under them. As one passed by, a light fell upon the loft, [thereupon] Rav Amram seized the ladder, which ten men could not raise, and he alone set it up and proceeded to ascend. When he had gone half way up the ladder, he stayed his feet and cried out, A fire at Rav Amram's! The Rabbis came and reproved him, We have shamed you! Said he to them: Better that you shame Amram in this world than that you be ashamed of him in the next. He then adjured it [the Tempter] to go forth from him, and it issued from him in the shape of a fiery column. Said he to it: See, you are fire and I am flesh, yet I am stronger than you.

Rebbi Meir used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him in the guise of a woman on the opposite bank of the river. As there was no ferry, he seized the rope\* and proceeded across. When he had reached half way along the rope, he [Satan] let him go saying: Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of Rebbi Meir and his learning," I would have valued your life at two ma'ahs.

Rebbi Akiva used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the top of a palm tree. Grasping the tree, he went climbing up: but when he reached half-way up the tree he [Satan] let him go, saying: Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, "Take heed of Rav Akiva and his learning," I would have valued your life at two ma'ahs.

\*Rashi: a rope stretched from bank to bank over a plank bridge.

As in the case of Rebbi Hanina bar Pappi, whom a certain matron urged [to immorality]. He pronounced a certain [magical] formula, whereupon his body was covered with boils and scabs; but she did something and he was healed. So he fled and hid himself in a bath-house in which when [even] two entered, even in daytime, they would suffer harm\*. The next morning the Rabbis asked him, Who guarded you? Said he to them, Two Imperial [armour] bearers guarded me all night. Said they to him, Perhaps you were tempted with immorality and successfully resisted? For it was taught: He who is tempted with immorality and successfully resists, a miracle is performed for him.

“[Bless ye the Lord, ye messenger's of his:] Ye mighty in strength, that fulfill his word, hearkening unto the voice of his word (Ps. CIII, 20)”. This refers to Rebbi Tzadok and his companions. Rebbi Tzadok was summoned by a certain matron [to immorality]. Said he to her, My heart is faint and I am unable; is there aught to eat? She answered him, There is non kosher food. He said to her, What does it matter? He who does this, eats that. She then fired the oven and was placing it [the forbidden meat] therein, when he ascended and sat in it. Said she to him, What is the meaning of this? He who does this, falls into that [the fire of hell], was his reply. Had I known that it is so heinous, said she, I would not have tormented you.

Rav Kahana was selling baskets, when a certain matron made [immoral] demands upon him. Said he to her, I will first adorn myself. He [thereupon] ascended and hurled himself from the roof towards earth, but Elijah came and caught him. You have troubled me [to come] four hundred parasangs, he reproved him. What caused me [to do it], he retorted; is it not poverty? So he gave him a bag [full] of denarii. ....

Rebbi Abbahu said on Rebbi Hanina's authority: Better had a man secretly transgress than publicly profane God's name, for it is said: As for you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord God: Go ye, serve every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto me: but my holy name shall ye not profane (Ezek. XX, 39).

Rebbi Il'ai the Elder said: If a man sees that his [evil] desire is conquering him, let him go to a place where he is unknown, don black and cover himself with black, and do as his heart desires, but let him not publicly profane God's name. But that is not so, for we learnt: He who is careless of his Master's honour, it were well for him that he had not come into the world. Now, to what does this refer? Rabbah said: To one who gazes at the rainbow\*\*. Rav Yoseph said: To one who secretly transgresses\*\*\*! There is no difficulty: the one means where he can subdue his evil desires; the other, where he cannot.

\*From demons; yet he stayed there the night alone, and was unhurt.

\*\*Which was regarded as the manifestation of God's glory, and to gaze upon it was disrespectful (cf. Ex. XXIV, 9-11).

\*\*\*Because he thereby shows that he fears man more than God.

Every time Rebbi Hiyya bar Abba fell upon his face he used to say, The Merciful save us from the Tempter. One day his wife heard him. Let us see, she reflected, it is so many years that he has separated himself from me: why then should he pray thus? One day, while he was studying in his garden, she adorned herself and repeatedly walked up and down before him. Who are you? he demanded. I am Harutha\*, and have returned from my work-day, she replied. He asked for her services. Said she to him, Bring me that pomegranate from the uppermost bough. He jumped up, went, and brought it to her. When he re-entered his house, his wife was firing the oven, whereupon he ascended and sat in it. What means this? she demanded. He told her what had befallen. It was I, she assured him; but he paid no

heed to her until she gave him proof\*\*. Nevertheless, said he, my intention was evil. That righteous man fasted all his life, until he died thereof.

\* A well known prostitute of that town.

\*\*The pomegranate.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukah, page 52a

Abaye explained, Against scholars more than against anyone\*; as was the case when Abaye heard a certain man saying to a woman, Let us arise betimes and go on our way. I will, said Abaye, follow them in order to keep them away from transgression, and he followed them for three parasangs across the meadows. When they parted company he heard them say, Our company is pleasant, the way is long. If it were I, said Abaye, I could not have restrained myself, and so went and leaned in deep anguish against a doorpost, when a certain old man\*\* came up to him and taught him: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination.

\* Does the Evil Inclination act.

\*\*Tradition identifies the anonymous old man with the spirit of Elijah.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma, page 69b

“And [they] cried with a great [loud] voice unto the Lord, their God (Nehemiah IX, 4).” What did they cry? Woe, woe, it is he\* who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him.\*\* We want neither him, nor reward through him! Thereupon a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word truth was inscribed. (R. Hanina said: One may learn therefrom that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth). They ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon he was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. Thereupon the Prophet said to Israel: This is the evil desire of idolatry, as it is said: And he said: “This is wickedness ( Zech. V, 8).” As they took hold of him a hair of his beard fell out, he raised his voice and it went [was audible] four hundred parasangs. Thereupon they said: How shall we act? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven! The prophet said unto them: Cast him into a leaden pot, closing its opening with lead. Because lead absorbs the voice, as it is said: “And he said: This is wickedness. And he cast her down into the midst of the measure, and he cast the weight of lead upon the mouth thereof.” They said: Since this is a time of Grace, let us pray for mercy for the Tempter to evil.\*\*\* They prayed for mercy, and he was handed over to them. He [the prophet] said to them: Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. Thereupon they said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy? They do not grant halves in heaven. They put out his eyes and let him go. It helped inasmuch as he no more entices men to commit incest.

\* The evil desire, tempter of idolatry.

\*\*For resisting him successfully Israel would be rewarded.

\*\*\* The evil desire for immorality.