

Elijah

2/9/18

6th JS: Talmud

Masechet B'rachot

During this unit, we studied the many laws that the rabbis taught in the Talmud about when and how to say the Shema and Amidah. They teach us the deadline for saying the Shema, what we're allowed to do during the Amidah, and use the story of Hannah from Samuel I to determine practices for prayer. In this essay, I will look at the way that the rabbis of the talmud teach us and the laws they teach, the way they then use the story of Hannah to find further laws, and reflect on my own experience of tefillah.

The rabbis of the Talmud use many forms of teaching to show what we have to do. They teach us the importance of saying the Shema by claiming that it was punishable by death, though probably not literally, and by setting two fake deadlines for saying so people would make sure to do it. They also show us a ma'aseh, or short story, about the sons of Rabban Gamliel, who come home after midnight. They have not yet said the Shema, but Rabban Gamliel says that any time the sages say midnight, they mean dawn. This shows us why we have these internal deadlines, as they make them nervous enough to make sure to say it by the last deadline of dawn. These are followed by the mitzvah of "heaviness of head" when praying the Amidah, which uses metaphor to emphasize the point of concentrated thought, and then says that even if a king talked to you or if a snake was coming up to you, you would not stop praying. It

presents another ma'aseh, this one being about a religious man being greeted by a high-ranking officer and waiting to finish his Amidah. The officer threatens the man, but the man compares G-d to a human king, which is a satisfactory metaphor to help the officer and the reader understand the kind of respect one gives to G-d.

The next section was about how we can bring learning from the story of Hannah into our tefillah. In this story, Hannah was a married woman who, unfortunately, couldn't have children. She was taunted about it and she got angry and depressed. She decided to pray to G-d about it. She was very serious about it and barely made a sound. The priest, Eli, thought that she was drunk. He called her out on it, but she explained to him that she was not; rather, she was simply praying seriously and personally. He apologized and blessed her, and eventually she had a son named Samuel, meaning "G-d heard". There are many laws that they learn from this story. One of them is that you shouldn't raise your voice high enough for others to hear during the Amidah, just like Eli couldn't hear Hannah. Another is that you should clear your name if somebody claims you've done something wrong, just as Hannah did when Eli claimed that she was drunk. One more is that if you falsely accuse someone of anything, you should not just apologize. You are supposed to, just like Eli, bless them as well.

These laws reflect many of the experiences I have in my T'fillah. Though I rarely pray outside of school and camp, inside of those experiences, we follow many of the laws during these. For example, in both school and camp, most of the Amidah is said quietly to ourselves, in accordance to the rules from Hannah. At school, during the elementary school, we have thought about and discussed the t'fillot that we have

learned fairly deeply, continuing the values found in the mitzvah of covered rosh even without having two hours a day to truly focus our thoughts like the Sages. Most of these laws are things that I do agree can make for a richer and more meaningful prayer and a better life. However, I do think that making not saying the Shema punishable by death was, in my opinion, not the best strategy for making Ma'ariv mandatory. I do not see why they couldn't have just said, "You must pray in the evening."

Overall, this was an interesting unit in talmud, and I learned a lot. I learned about the laws of the Shema, the focus required for the Amidah, and the ways the story of Hannah represents other laws of the Amidah. I then looked at the ways these are found in my T'filla experience. Through this unit, I got interested in how seriously other Jews take their prayers. I have never been that interested or committed, but I find others' devotion interesting. Overall, this was a unit where I learned a lot about Jewish law, and I think that it makes me curious about other Jewish laws I have or haven't heard about.