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Talmud

Talmud Essay

This semester we, the sixth grade, studied many Talmudic texts about behavior during tefillah. The Amoraim of the Talmud taught us about tefillah through the story of Hannah, mishnaic texts and different ma'asot. My way of davening is similar and different in many ways to the laws and lessons they formulated through the ma'asim, the stories of Rabban Gamliel and his sons, the officer and the chassid, and Hannah. These stories have made me think in depth about tefillah and how my tefillah is similar and different to the ways of the Talmudic Rabbis.

In the book of Brachot, text one, the question is asked, until what hour we can say the evening Shema? There are three opinions. The Chachamim say midnight is the deadline. Rabban Gamliel says that you have until dawn. Rabbi Eliezer says you have until the end of the first watch. {Rabbi Eliezer's opinion isn't relevant in the rest of the story}. The opinions of Rabban Gamliel and the Chachamim are the ones I will be focusing on. Rabban Gamliel disagrees with the Chachamim. He says that though the Chachamim say midnight, he believes that they really mean until dawn. He says that they do this because they are worried someone will forget to say the evening Shema.

The Chachamim build a "Fence" around their words by saying midnight and Rabban Gamliel "Breaks the fence" by telling his sons the real final limit. He told them the real limit because it was after midnight and they thought they had missed their opportunity to say the Shema. In my own life I am a forgetful and I realize that sometimes I forget to say the Shema. I see pros in both sides of the argument. On the Chachamim side, having a stricter time limit makes people remember things because they have less flexibility. On Rabban Gamliel's side, it is nice for a forgetful person to have more time left in case they forget. There are also cons to both opinions. On Rabban Gamliel's side, you can think you have more time and fall asleep but not wake up in time. On the Chachamim side, in a modern setting people don't necessarily go to bed

by midnight so if they are working or partying they wouldn't have said the Shema. The largest issue with Chachamim's side is that they are setting people up to fail. If after midnight you say "Now I can't say the Shema" if you follow the law of the Chachamim when you are really missing an opportunity. After hearing both arguments I side with Rabban Gamliel's opinion. My reasoning is I don't believe we should set people up to fail.

In the olden days, the righteous men would meditate for an hour before saying the Amidah to get them into the right frame of mind. This shows how important the amidah is to people. In the talmud, there are many opinions that state you can't stop saying the Amidah under any circumstances. We learn in Brachot thirty, we shouldn't stop saying the Amidah even if a snake wraps itself around your leg or if a king greets you. In a ma'aseh, we learned about a chassid who was davening. At the start of the story, an officer came up to him and greeted him. Since the chassid was davening the Amidah, he didn't respond to the officer. When he finished the officer said, "You can be killed for not responding to an officer." The chassid responded: "If the king was standing before you and your friend said hello, would you respond?" The officer thought about it and replied: "No." The chassid then said "God is like a king to me, the king of all kings," and the officer understood. One lesson I take away was that you must respect everyone's beliefs. There is also a negative side. The chassid unnecessarily put his life at stake. The chassid might of kept praying out of devotion to god but I think a life is more valuable. I wouldn't continue praying in a life threatening situation. There is a Jewish law- "פיקוח נפש," which basically means health before mitzvot. I think continuing to daven in a life threatening is breaking that law. This is a situation where I disagree with the chassid. I would stop praying in a life threatening situation. I agree that the Amidah is important but, I believe people should stop praying in life threatening situations.

Rav Hamnunah say "How many great laws can we learn from Hannah!" I say he took away some good lessons and others, in a way, contradict my ideas. The story of Hannah is in the Tanakh, in the first book of Samuel. Rav Hamnunah teaches we can't be drunk during tefillah and we must focus our hearts during prayer. He formulates these laws based on the story of

Hannah. This makes sense to me. On the other hand, one interpretation of a lesson taught is that we shouldn't raise our voices. If this interpretation is correct, this lesson doesn't fit what I have been taught. My teachers always say sing loud during tefillah and this lesson contradicts that. It really shows how many lessons and laws contradict other laws in Judaism. That specific lesson contradicts my prayer because I am a loud person and I sing loudly during tefillah. It says the word "Tefillah," but they mean the silent Amidah I can understand it. Even though I disagree with that specific lesson based on my interpretation, I believe many important lessons can be learned from Hannah.

Towards the end of our study on laws formulated by studying Hannah, we learned some less tefillah related material. These lessons were important and fascinating. We learn we must tell our friends if they are doing something wrong. I find this to be an important lesson because we should help our friends out. Normally, I think that it is offensive to point out people's minor mistakes but at the right times in the right way it is better to. I think it is very important to point out major mistakes. The specific lesson I found fascinating was taken away from when Eli said to Hannah "Go in Peace!" From this the Rav Hamnunah learned, if you falsely accuse someone, you must let them go and apologize. They also say you must bless your friend if this happens. I find that fascinating. Why? Because blessing seems to be a holy/godly thing and the Rav Hamnunah say you must bless someone you falsely accused. I think the reasoning is if you falsely accuse someone and just apologize and let them go you are making them even with you. The reason you bless them is to make them more than even, above you because you wronged them. I think Rav Hamnunah took away some very interesting lessons from Hannah.

Although the stories are different, the lessons for the Shema (Rabban Gamliel) and the Amidah (the chassid, the officer and Hannah) are similar. In all three examples, a story that could realistically happen is used as a structure to build a lesson off to teach about the laws/lessons of tefillah.

In conclusion, over this semester the laws/lessons we learned that were taught by the amoraim and the tannaim are interesting, intelligent and contradicting. Some make sense to me

and others don't. Some contradict what I'm taught and others show important themes and values. Each lessons left a different idea in my head because they are all different. All in all, I found this to be some very interesting and enjoyable material that really made me think.