

Leave-taking: The Paradox of Parting

When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai became deathly ill, his students entered to visit him. When he saw them, he cried. They said to him: Master! Lamp of Israel! Steadfast Pillar! Mighty Hammer! Why are you crying? He said to them: If I was being taken before a king of flesh and blood, it could be that he would rule today but not tomorrow. If he was angry at me, it is possible that his anger would pass; and if he imprisoned me, his imprisonment would not last forever. Even if he killed me, this death would not be an eternal death. It is possible that I might be able to appease him with words and bribe him with gifts. Even under those conditions, I would be afraid. But now they bring me before the king who is the king of all kings, the blessed Holy One, who lives forever and ever. If he is angry at me, his anger is forever; and if he incarcerates me, his incarceration is forever. If he kills me, then the execution is for eternity; nor can I appease him with words or bribe him with gifts. And what is more, there are two roads before me, one to Gan Eden and one to Gehinom and I don't know down which one they will lead me. Shall I not cry?!

They said to him: Our master, bless us! He said to them: May it be His will that the fear of heaven be upon you as much as the fear of flesh and blood. His students said to him: That's it?! He said to them: I wish you could do this much! For when a person transgresses, he says, "I hope no one saw me." Just as he was dying, Rabban Yohanan said to them: Empty the house of all its vessels to avoid their impurity and prepare a chair for Hezekiah, king of Judah, who is coming.

(Babylonian Talmud Berachot 28a)

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