

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 15, 2005 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### WHO BY FIRE AND WHO BY WATER

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The recent hurricane that struck the Gulf Coast did not spare the virtuous nor punish the wicked. Those who could not leave because they did not have cars (or because the local government didn't provide busses to evacuate) contained a proportional number of righteous and wicked. (By the way, despite rumor mongering, from what we are seeing at the Astrodome, I would say the proportion is 98% v. 2% although in the Third World environment of the Superdome people were assuredly not at their best.) Nonetheless, the impulse to believe that God will spare the righteous is universal and timeless as these stories show.

Once a plague broke out in Sura but it did not affect one neighborhood...on account of the merit of a certain man who made it a practice to lend shovel and spade for burials.

Once a fire broke out in Derokeret but it did not spread to one neighborhood....on account of a certain woman who would heat her oven before Shabbat and permit her neighbors to make use of it. (Bavli Taanit 21b)

Note the "karma" in these stories: the man helped in burials so no burials were necessary in his neighborhood. The woman aided people by sharing her fire so no fire touched her neighborhood. I find it fascinating that this theme is carried forward into modern literature as in this piece from a story by Isak Dinesen (Out of Africa, Babette's Feast):

It was a grave disaster, in six hours more than thirty houses were laid in ashes. It was reported that the mighty glow from the fire on the sky could be seen from Lillesand and from ships lying off Mandal. That night it blew a gale from the northwest, so that the fire, which first sprang up in Lillegade, ran straight toward my great-great-grandfather's house and warehouses in Vestergade, and it looked as if they were doomed.

Already Jens Guttormsen's servants and shop assistants had begun to bring out money chests and ledgers. Many people had gathered at the other end of the street, and some of them wept for the good man who was to see all that he had collected in life brought to nothing. So close was the fire, old people of the town have been telling, that in the midst of winter it was as hot in the street as in a bakehouse.

Then Jens Aabel came out of his gate with his scales in his right hand and his yardstick in his left. He took his stand in the street and spoke in a loud voice, so that all heard it. He said: "Here stand I, Jens Guttormsen Aabel, merchant of this town with my scales and my measure. If in my day I have made wrong use of any of them, then, wind and fire, proceed against my house! But if I have used these righteous things righteously, then you two wild servants of God will spare my house, so that in years to come it may serve men and women of Christianssand as before."

And at that moment, just when he had spoken, all people in the street saw the wind waver and for a moment cease altogether, so that smoke and sparks swept down over them. But immediately after it changed and shifted from northwest to due north, and the fire served off Vestergade and down toward the marketplace. Jens Aabel's house in this way was out of danger, and the things which had just been brought out could be brought in again. (Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard, Isak Dinesen, New York:

[Vintage International, 1993, pp. 114-115\)](#)

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. When someone is struck with misfortune, the natural tendency of others is to try to distinguish between themselves and the one who is suffering. For example, if someone has lung cancer, the first question people often ask is, "Was s/he a smoker?" This makes the person feel different, and therefore safe. Our Talmud passage turn this impulse on its head and suggests that by doing acts of loving kindness one can "inoculate" not only oneself but ones community from misfortune. Does this theory have merit? Have you ever seen it work? What happened?
2. I confess that, as a Houstonian, I am proud of my city's response to Katrina. However, I also confess that just about every Houstonian looked at New Orleans, Mississippi and Alabama and thought, "There but for the grace of God go I." Does that diminish the virtue of our response? Or do we need experience, in this case of past hurricanes, and recognition of vulnerability to create empathy?
3. We are preparing for the High Holidays when, our prayers tell us, God will decide who dies by fire and who by water. It is often one of the most difficult prayers for us to swallow. Yet our Talmud text affirms that goodness can avert the harsh decree. How will you approach this prayer this year?