

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted November 8, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

BH

WHERE HAVE THE ANGELS GONE?

Dear Friends,

Sometimes it's as interesting to study something that's not there as something that is. In our case, in this learning session, our question is, "Why are there no angels mentioned in either Leviticus or the Mishnah?" It is clear from the Jewish Scriptures that the concept of angels was widespread: e.g., the angel at the binding of Isaac. So why are there simply no angels in the Mishnah.

Up until the 20th century, someone who did not believe in angels would be considered mentally ill. It was clear to everyone that the world was filled with angels and demons of all sorts. We have long lists of angelologies in the non-canonical works of the Second Temple period so we know the belief in them was widespread.

And later rabbinic literature expresses a deep belief that heaven and earth are connected and that what happens in the earthly realm affects what happens in the upper realms:

"Let him direct his thoughts to the chamber of the Holy of Holies (M. Berachot 4:5)" To which chamber of the Holy of Holies? R. Hiyya the great [said], "Toward the [chamber of the] Holy of Holies above [in heaven]." Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta said, "Toward the chamber of the Holy of Holies below [in the Temple]." Said R. Pinchas, "They do not dispute one another. For the chamber of the Holy of Holies down below is opposite the chamber of the Holy of Holies up above, [as implied in the verse,] "The place (makhon, mem chaf vav nun); O Lord, which you have made for your abode [i.e., the Temple]. (Exodus 15:17)" [Read the verse rather as follows:] Situated opposite (m'khaven, mem chaf vav vav nun) your abode [i.e., the Temple]." [What is situated opposite it? It is, "The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. (Exodus 15:17)"] (Y. Berachot 4:5, 8c)

This passage from the Yerushalmi starts with the premise that there are two Holy of Holies and from thence, makes a pun on the words machon and m'khaven, which differ by only one letter, to demonstrate that the two are located

opposite each other. The context for this point is that one is to direct one's heart to the Holy of Holies when praying. The conclusion reached is that directing one's heart toward one is like directing it toward them both, since they are linked spatially and spiritually. In this heavenly Temple are an altar and a high priest, just as there are in the earthly one:

Zevul is that [level of heaven] in which [the heavenly] Jerusalem and the Temple and the Altar are built, and Michael, the great Prince, stands and offers on it an offering. (B. Hagigah 12b//B. Menachot 110a)

So, when the high priest officiated at the cult, below, he was a reflection of the cult above and corresponded to Michael, Israel's "national" angel, as it were. (Each of the seventy nations has a representative angel. Michael defends and represents Israel before God (B. Yoma 77a)).

In the parallel text, we find a link between the cult and the sages:

"This is an ordinance for ever to Israel (II Chronicles 2:3)" R. Giddal said in the name of Rav, This [refers to] the altar built [in heaven], and [upon which] Michael the great Prince stands and offers on it an offering. And Rabbi Yohanan said, These [words refer to] students of sages who are occupied with the laws of [the Temple] service. Scripture accounts it to them as if the Temple were built in their days. (B. Menachot 110a)

So what happened to angels in Leviticus and the Mishnah? Why were these widely held beliefs suppressed?

Discussion Questions:

1. What is your answer to the question of why Leviticus and Misnah do not mention angels? What are similarities these works share?
2. One of the most stunning of mystical beliefs is that what we do has heavenly consequences and that we are co-workers with the angels. Indeed, we often serve, consciously or unconsciously, as God's messengers/angels in this world. Is this a belief you can accept? Why or why not?
3. In the Jewish community at the beginning of the last century, great emphasis was placed on making Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe give up their "superstitious" belief in angels. How has that affected American Jewry?