

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted September 22, 2011, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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WHO BY FIRE AND WHO BY WATER ... AND A BOOK YOU SIMPLY MUST READ

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These study passages are, as a rule, Talmudic texts. But occasionally, another book comes along that is so luminous, so meaningful and so important, that I'm giving you a reading assignment. The book contains a great deal of information about Jewish liturgical poems, called piyyutim. This is important because the High Holiday services are chock full of these poems.

In our sages' days, a payytan, a poet would create a poem for each Shabbat and holiday and weave it through the service, so each such service would be what we call a "creative service." There were many, many of these poems and the ones in our High Holiday liturgy are sort of "the greatest hits" of these poems. (For more on piyyutim see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=360&letter=P>)

One of the ways we have found out more about these poems and their composers is through the Cairo Genizah. This Genizah has yielded more texts about the Jewish community from approximately 800-1100 than anyone would have dared hope for. If you've never heard of the Cairo Genizah, read Goitein's A Mediterranean Life (either the condensed version or the full 5-volume version).

And now, a wonderful, luminescent book about how Geniza studies has developed over the last 100 years, called Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza by Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole. How good is it? When I was reading it, I took it into the grocery store so that, if I had to wait in line, I could keep reading. There is a great deal of information about piyyutim in this book.

Discussion Questions:

1. At services, when you get to a piyyut, e.g., anything that has an alphabetical organization or or "feels" like poetry (e.g., Ki Anu Amecha, "For We are Your People") think about the poet who wrote it and to what they might have been responding in their world. Does it add to your ability to pray to understand the poem and when it was created?
2. If you were to compose a poem for the High Holidays, what it might it be? Please share it with the rest of us!
3. I wrote services for families with kids (published by Kar Ben Books) and wrote two "piyyutim" using the letters

of the word "teshuvah" (repentance).

We	Told the truth.
We ran	Errands
We	Shared
We	Helped
We	Understood
We	Volunteered
We	Acted properly
We	Hugged
We also	Tattled
We	Embarrassed people
We	Spoke rudely
We	Hurt others
We were	Unpleasant
We were	Very obnoxious
We	Acted badly
We	hit

May you be written and sealed for a happy, healthy new year!