

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted December 5, 2002 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.

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SEEING AND HEARING THE DEEPEST SECRETS OF THE TEMPLE © Judith Z. Abrams, 2002

In our last study session, we learned that the sound of the High Priest pronouncing God's name on Yom Kippur could be heard as far as 20 miles away from the Temple. This debunks the common myth that it could only be heard in the Holy of Holies.

Another common myth is that the ark was always secreted away in the Holy of Holies. However, as we learn in this passage, it was taken out on the festivals:

Rav Kattina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman.

... Rav Nahman said: That may be compared to a bride: As long as she is in her father's house, she is reserved in regard to her husband, but when she comes to her father-in-law's house, she is no more so reserved in regard to him. (B. Yoma 54a)

The festivals at which Israel would appear were the pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot (Exodus 23:17). Only the best representatives of the people could attend this "spiritual wedding ceremony" between God and Israel:

Calendrical rites...almost always refer to large groups and quite often embrace whole societies. Often, too, they are performed at well-delineated points in the annual productive cycle, and attest to the passage from scarcity to plenty (as at first fruits or harvest festivals) or from plenty to scarcity (as when the hardships of winter are anticipated and magically warded against). To these also one should add all rites de passage, which accompany any change of a collective sort from one state to another, as when a whole tribe goes to war, or a large local community performs ritual to reverse the effects of famine, drought, or plague. Life-crisis rites and rituals of induction into office are almost always rites of status elevation; calendrical rites and rites of group crisis may sometimes be rites of status reversal. At

such a moment, when the entire community goes through a liminal, i.e., intrastructural, phase, apparently only the best representatives of the group participate in the ritual which reinforces the society's structure. (Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969, p. 168.)

The festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot are intimately linked to the agricultural cycle of harvesting and planting. It is on these holidays that the Israelites must appear in the Temple with an offering. If, at these moments, God is "inspecting the troops", as it were, and determining if they were worthy of further support and agricultural bounty, and if the priests were considered the finest representatives of the Jewish people, then it is logical that at such a moment of transition, all Israelites who appeared at the Temple for "inspection" would be required to be as close to the priestly ideal as possible, i.e., male, free, grown and blemishless as possible.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are our great calendrical rites in Judaism today, when everyone gathers and the "troops are inspected"? How does this differ from other moments in synagogue life?
2. Are you surprised to find that the ark with the cherubim on top was revealed to the people at this time? How about the idea that the cherubim were "embracing" and that this represented the relationship of God and Israel? How does this change your vision of the ark and the cherubim?
3. Have you ever been to Hoshanah Rabbah services? If so, how does the ceremony of the (male) congregants marrying the (female) Torah reflect the ancient tendencies seen in this passage?