

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted January 3, 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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Dear Friends,

Many people are searching for mystical enlightenment. And yet, this is a highly dangerous enterprise. True mystical insight cannot be taught. According to the Mishnah, you must understand it from your own knowledge (M. Hagigah 2:1). This phrase is used nowhere else in rabbinic literature so it is difficult to interpret. However, on the face of it, it would seem that such mystical insight must be acquired from one's own insight.

Let us think practically about the story of the four sages who tried to attain this insight.

It is told that four great sages tried to do this secret service. These were four incredibly learned men of very advanced spiritual development.

One of them went mad.

One of them died.

One of them lost his faith.

Only one came through the experience safely. (Based on T. Hagigah 2:3-4)

In the generation of the four sages, there were 20 well-known sages and we can posit that there were, perhaps, 200 lesser-known sages. So we could imagine that approximately 2% of sages could try to gain this level of enlightenment and only about 0.5% could do so safely. And this counts only sages, not lay Israelites.

Discussion Questions:

1. Kabbalah, i.e., Jewish mystical texts, are very popular these days. People long to know secrets while those who know secrets find their lives forever changed. Would you be willing to have your whole life changed in exchange for deep mystical insight?
2. A hint for those who would like to achieve this level of insight: it takes years of study of Torah, rabbinic

literature and Jewish mystical texts. And yet, you will find in the end, that these were but delightful decoys. Perhaps the following text will clarify things a bit:

But even Solomon, he says, "the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain." (i.e., even while living) "in the congregation of the dead." Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee, as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (Herman Melville, Moby Dick, "The Try-Works")

Where is the true path to enlightenment?