

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted October 27, 2005 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

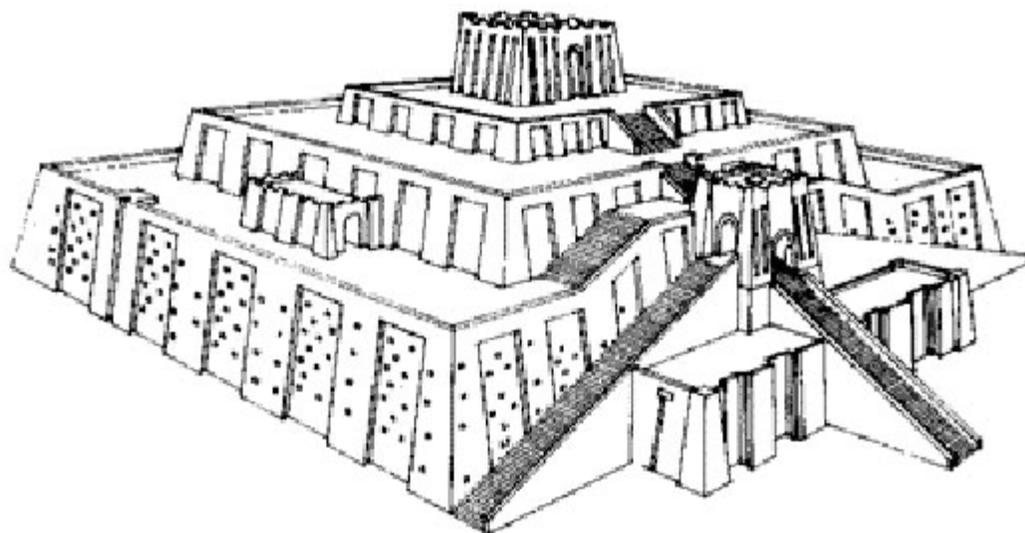
BH

THE THREE SEASONS OF LIFE: 40-40-40

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This session's study text reflects a new insight into a subject over which I have long puzzled. I have understood the significance of the number 7 and related numbers such as 49 (the days of the week, the number of visible planets in the ancient world, etc.) and the number 10 (ten fingers and ten toes, a base-ten number system) and even numbers such as 12, 18, 36 and 60 which relate to the base-60 number system of ancient Mesopotamia. But I have never truly understood why the number 40 should be so important....until now.

I finally realized that if your religion is symbolized by a square building then the number 40 really stands for 4×10 , i.e., wholeness, the numerical shape of the place where your deity is worshipped and/or resides. This would hold true for the two great superpowers of the Middle East during Israel's existence, the Mesopotamians....



Reconstruction of the Ziggurat at Ur

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziggurat>

and the Egyptians.



http://www.hunkler.com/pyramids/pyramid_tour.html

The number 40 says, in effect, "Really, really big" or "Been around the block" or "That's the biggest we can do." (All these phrases are Kurt Lothman's, a student of mine.). So 40 days and nights of rain or staying on top of Mount Sinai (both stories that involve mountaintops whose shapes are the natural inspirations for ziggurats) is saying, "As long as possible." The standard lashing punishment is 40 lashes, i.e., "the maximum punishment. The amount of water needed to fill a mikveh is 40 seahs (76 gallons), i.e., "enough to cover over the entire body at once."

And when a person has lived out the three phases of life s/he does it in periods 40 years long:

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai lived altogether a hundred and twenty years: For forty years he was in business, forty years he studied, and forty years he taught. (B. Rosh Hashanah 31b)

Discussion Questions:

1. Pyramids and ziggurats are important to this day. Take a look at the back of a one-dollar bill. There you will see a pyramid with an eye at its top. Why do you think a pyramid was so important that it was put on our most basic piece of currency? Where else do we see pyramids and ziggurats in our culture? What symbolism do they suggest?
2. In Buddhist thought, the three phases of ones life are childhood, householder, and religious. How does this paradigm compare with that of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's periods of life? Do you have recognizable periods in your life? What are they?
3. Can you think of other instances of the number 40 in Judaism? What are they? How do they relate to the theory put forward here?
4. Do you think this explanation of the meaning of the number 40 is correct? Why or why not? Do you have an alternative explanation? Please share it.