

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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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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THE POWER OF GOD'S NAMES AND HOW TO SPOT IMPROPER USES OF THEM

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One of the most important functions that occurred in the Temple was the pronunciation of God's name. This name, yud-hey-vav-hey, could only be uttered safely in the Temple. It needed the huge physical and ritual structure to contain its power. Think of it the way you would think of the proper, safe storage of radioactive material. Elaborate precautions and firm rituals must be put in place and followed so that the power of the material would not leak out and overwhelm the public. On Yom Kippur, when humans are most like angels, we can bear hearing the power of this name.

Our Rabbis taught: Ten times did the high priest pronounce the [Ineffable] Name on that day: Three times at the first confession, thrice at the second confession, thrice in connection with the he-goat to be sent away, and once in connection with the lots. And it already happened that when he pronounced the Name, his voice was heard even unto Jericho. (B. Yoma 39b)

Penalties for pronouncing the Name outside the Temple were severe. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion (Beruriah's father) was burned at the stake for teaching Torah. As he pondered his fate, he concluded that he deserved this punishment because he had uttered God's true name outside the Temple.

[The punishment of being] burnt came upon him [Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion] because he pronounced the Name in its full spelling. But how could he do so? Have we not learned: These are they who have no portion in the world to come: He who says the Torah is not from Heaven or that the resurrection of the dead is not taught in the Torah. Abba Shaul says: Also he who pronounces the Name in its full spelling. (B. Avodah Zarah 17b-18a)

While God's four-lettered name is deeply powerful and important, God has other names which have great power. For

example, the 42-lettered name of God is one through which human beings can change reality. Not surprisingly, one must be extremely virtuous to be allowed the use of such a powerful name.

Rav Judah said in Rav's name: The forty-two lettered Name is entrusted only to him who is pious, meek, middle-aged, free from bad temper, sober and not insistent on his rights. And he who knows it, is heedful thereof, and observes it in purity, is beloved above and popular below, feared by man and inherits two worlds, this world and the future world. (B. Kiddushin 71a)

Yet another of God's names is the 72-syllabled one. It is composed from the word of Exodus 14:19-21, each of these verses having 72 letters. This name of God is made by joining the first letter of verse 19, the last letter of 20 and the first of 21 to form the first triad; then the second letter of 19, the penultimate of 20 and the second of 21 to make the second triad and so forth.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Obviously, God has many names, just as humans do. Names call forth different parts of ourselves. "Professor, mommy, sweetheart, etc." are the keys that open up energy from the disparate parts of ourselves. Why do you think God's four-lettered name (known properly as the Tetragrammaton) is the most potent of them all? What does it represent? To what part of God does it give us access?
2. Many people who study kabbalah, especially beginners, are drawn to the power with which Zohar can connect one. How do you feel this fits in with Jewish theology?
3. Studying any subject of such cosmic consequence as God's names must be done on the highest spiritual level... without any desire to use the knowledge one gains from the learning. There are teachers who emphasize the powers of God and the powers of God's names as a way of luring learners into a cult-like situation. How is their teaching tainted by connecting it with power?