

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted January 15, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### SHAMING PEOPLE AFTER THEY'VE DONE THE WRONG THING

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In our last study passage we learned about shaming people into doing the right thing. In this passage we explore what steps were taken, in the sages' day, to shaming people who'd already done the wrong thing.

Of all the rituals relating to a woman's marital status, from betrothal, wedding, divorce, widowhood, possible unfaithfulness (sotah) to halitsah (wherein a man refuses to wed his brother's widow and thus give that brother an heir), the one that is probably least well-known is the ritual of k'tsatsah. K'tsatsah means "cutting off".

In this ritual, a priest who has married an unsuitable woman is publicly denounced. One could only attain the status of a priest through unblemished lineage. A priest was not permitted to marry a divorced woman or a harlot (Leviticus 21:7) or a woman who rejected her brother-in-law's offer of marriage (M. Yebamot 2:4). Children resulting from such unions may not marry priests. In order to bring this lesson out as clearly as possible a dramatic ritual took place.

**The Rabbis taught: In what manner does k'tsatsah take place? If one of the brothers [of a priestly family] has married a woman who is unworthy of him, the members of the family come together, bring a cask full of fruit, break it in the middle of the open place and say: Brethren of the house of Israel, hear. Our brother So-and-so has married a woman who is not worthy of him, and we are afraid lest his descendants will be united with our descendants. Come and take for yourselves a sign for future generations, that his descendants shall not be united with our descendants'. (B. Ketubot 28b)**

It is possible to understand the concern of this priest's brethren. To assure the community that their children were fit to officiate in the Temple they had to create a divide between their own offspring and this priest's. By spilling out the "fruit of his womb", so to speak, into the public square, they metaphorically demonstrated that he and his family were cast out of eligibility for priesthood.

We must also assume that this priest knew the sanctions he'd incur by marrying this woman and having children with her. It would seem logical to suppose that he was willing to withstand his public shaming and his children's diminished prospects for the benefit of the marriage he had made. To be sure, the children would still be allowed to marry most Jews freely. They simply could not marry priests.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. This ritual, of basically excommunicating an individual from a group in order to maintain that group's integrity, brings to mind the issue of Pete Rose's reinstatement in baseball. Should he be allowed back into baseball and be eligible to be in the Hall of Fame? Please explain why you think he should or shouldn't.
2. The ritual of k'tsatsah shames not only the priest but his wife and children as well. What happens when public sanctions carry with them "collateral damage"?
3. This ritual also brings up the issue of mamzeirut, illegitimacy. Mamzeirim (bastards) are not eligible to marry any Jews nor are their children until the memory of their status has been forgotten. Is it best to keep records of who is a mamzeir or is it best to leave such information to be forgotten within a generation or two?

