

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted February 14, 2003 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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CONTEMPORARY JEWISH LAW AND COLUMBIA ASTRONAUT RAMON'S WIDOW

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The tragic breakup of the shuttle Columbia has brought an issue from Talmud into the public eye. That issue is giving permission for a woman to remarry when it is claimed that the husband is dead but there were no witnesses to the death nor were any remains found. (At this point I believe human remains have been found so the point is moot. Still, this is a quite an instructive case in rabbinic thinking.)

Perhaps a day or two after the Columbia broke up, the Chief Rabbi of Israel issued a ruling that Mrs. Ramon could remarry. Some people thought this ruling incredibly callous. She couldn't possibly be thinking of remarrying at such a time and they thought it was insensitive of him to mention it. They completely misunderstood the import of the rabbi's words.

According to the tractate Yebamot, a woman whose husband disappears in a lake, all of the edges of which cannot be seen, cannot remarry as he may have lived and gotten out. If he lived and she remarried she'd be guilty of adultery (a capital offense) and any offspring of that union would be considered mamzeirim, illegitimate.

Space is pretty much the ultimate "lake with no visible boundaries". Yet the Chief Rabbi immediately issued the ruling that Mrs. Ramon could remarry. This was his use of technical, halachic language to say the following: "We have not found your husband's body yet we are quite sure he is dead. You are therefore entitled to sit shivah, observe sheloshim, yartseit, etc."

Moreover, the rabbi's immediate ruling preempted any ridiculous ruling from any other rabbi who might say that the family should hold out some hope that he had lived. Because of the circumstances of his death, his family will certainly, for years to come, cherish the hope that he will walk through their front door someday. After all, he literally vanished into thin air. By saying she was free to remarry, the Chief Rabbi was doing what most Jewish mourning

practices do: make people face reality and not slip into the natural state of denial.

One last point of interest. According to the sages, since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been given to the mentally ill and young children (B. Baba Batra 12b). When the shuttle took off, Astronaut Ramon's 5-year-old daughter said, "I have lost my father!"

Discussion Questions:

1. Can you think of other times when a misunderstanding of technical language caused problems, be it in Jewish law, secular law, medicine or any other endeavor? How was the misunderstanding solved?
2. How can Jewish traditions help people mourn sudden death?