

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted February 28, 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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THE RAINBOW, NOAH'S ARK AND THE TEMPLE

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According to M. Sukkah 5:4, there are 15 psalms that are designated "Songs of Ascent" (Psalms 120-135), corresponding to the 15 semi-circular steps that led from the courtyard where pilgrims gathered up to the area of the Sanctuary and altar itself (see <http://www.templemodels.com/temple/Fullsizewht1200.jpg>). The Levites would enter the courtyard where people waited their turn to enter into the Temple precinct proper. Leading up to the Temple area were 15 semi-circular steps. On each one of these steps the Levites would sing one of these psalms of ascent until they reached the platform between the outer courtyard and the Temple courtyard. Then they would station themselves on the border between these two areas and provide the musical accompaniment to the service. Some selected passages from these psalms are presented here:

A song of ascents.

In my distress I called to the Lord and He answered me.

(Psalm 120)

A song for ascents.

I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot give way; your guardian will not slumber.

See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!

The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your protection at your right hand.

By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.

The Lord will guard you from all harm; He will guard your life.

The Lord will guard your going and coming now and forever. (Psalm 121)

A song of ascents.

When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion-we see it as in a dream-our mouths shall be filled with

laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy.
Then shall they say among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them!"
The Lord will do great things for us and we shall rejoice.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like watercourses in the Negeb.
They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.
Though he goes along weeping, carrying the seedbag, he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves. (Psalm 126)

A song of ascents.
Out of the depths I call You, O Lord.
O Lord, listen to my cry; let Your ears be attentive to my plea for mercy.
If You keep account of sins, O Lord, Lord, who will survive?
Yours is the power to forgive so that You may be held in awe.
I look to the Lord; I look to Him; I await His word.
I am more eager for the Lord than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, wait for the Lord; for with the Lord is steadfast love and great power to redeem.
It is He who will redeem Israel from all their iniquities. (Psalm 130)

A song of ascents.
Now bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who stand nightly in the house of the Lord.
Lift your hands toward the sanctuary and bless the Lord.
May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion. (Psalm 134)

Immediately after this, Psalm 135 begins with the rousing cry of "Halleluyah!" and ends by calling upon all present to bless God:

O house of Israel, bless the Lord; O house of Aaron, bless the Lord;
O house of Levi, bless the Lord; you who fear the Lord, bless the Lord.
Blessed is the Lord from Zion, He who dwells in Jerusalem. Halleluyah. (Psalm 135)

We might wonder why, in such a relentlessly rectangular compound, these steps were in a semicircular pattern. Such a configuration resembles the shape of a rainbow which was a prominent feature featured in the Noah narrative. Noah's ark and the Temple are intimately connected in both purpose (salvation) and form (multi-leveled, their construction specifically commanded by God). In the Noah's story, the rainbow spans the space between heaven and earth. In the Temple, the rainbow-shaped steps bridge the gap between holy and profane, connecting the outer courtyard where worshippers gathered to the inner precincts of the Temple compound itself. The Temple compound proper, beyond these semi-circular steps, where the sacrifices were carried out, has greater holiness than the more profane outer court where the public gathered and waited to bring their sacrifices.

The hallmark of Judaism, when compared with idolatry, is that Judaism's God is as bound by the covenant at Sinai as are the Jewish people. One might give offerings to pagan gods but there was no expectation that the god in question could deliver what was requested since the gods were always arguing among themselves. In Judaism, with only one God who consented to limit Divine power to be in a relationship with the Jewish people, there was an expectation of consistency and fairness. These expectations would be most important to those making sacrifices. Instead of being a gamble, as when offering sacrifices to a pagan god, sacrifices to God were made with confidence that the offering would be received and the prayer of the petitioner heard.

The ceremonial recitation of the songs of ascents would affirm the deepest hopes of the assembled congregation. Psalm 120 begins not only literarily at a low point ("In my distress I called to the Lord) but also physically. The Levites would begin at the bottom stair and the opening verse of this psalm would reflect their position at a low point; a time of distress. In Psalm 121, the congregation's eyes would be directed upward, toward the Temple and be assured that God was perpetually present and watchful.

Psalm 126 is, perhaps, the best known of these psalms as it is recited before the grace after meals on Shabbat and

holidays. The psalm describes a farmer sowing in tears and reaping in joy. Why would someone cry while planting seeds? If they were the person's very last seeds. If these seeds do not bear fruit the person will die of starvation. Yet the message of this psalm is that one perseveres, even when one is down to his last hope, planting his seed corn. Those who had come to the Temple in dire need would find such a message comforting; assured that their sacrifices would elicit God's favor.

Psalm 135 could have been sung by the Levites who, at the top of the staircase, would call on all the different constituencies in the Temple compound, Israelites, Priests, Levites and non-Jews ("you who fear the Lord") to bless God. One imagines that each group would reply in response to the Levites' call. Then, the entire congregation could join together as the subject matter of Psalm 135 (God's role in creation and history) was repeated in Psalm 136 with the congregational refrain, "His steadfast love is eternal."

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is Psalm 130, which begins, "Out of the depths I call to You" sung when the Levites are already two-thirds of the way up the steps? Wouldn't it have been more logical to have that be the first or second psalm recited? Could the depths be other than physical depths? How would you explain this?
2. Non-Jews offered sacrifices at the Temple. For example, even Agrippa was reported to have brought a First Fruit offering on Shavuot (M. Bikkurim 3:4). Would the prayers and gifts of non-Jews be welcome in synagogues and Jewish organizations today? Why or why not? Or perhaps we might ask, to what extent? Is a menorah lighting on the White House lawn akin to this activity?
3. How might you imagine incorporating the original choreography of these psalms into your worship today?