

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted June 9, 2011, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

LOOKING FOR TRUTH, NOT ANSWERS

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A new student said he was, "Looking for truth, not answers." I thought it was a wonderful way to frame the search for knowledge, and especially our approach to our texts.

Our last study passage was about telling your family what you want at your funeral and after your death. Now I want us to look at an even more uncomfortable problem: how to prepare for the eventuality that you might come to a place where you don't want to be alive anymore.

Now, we know that giving in to despair is something that we are not allowed to do in Judaism and that we "choose life." But what happens when our essential spark disappears, leaving behind functioning lungs and limb, but our "usness" is gone? The Talmud understands this issue:

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in [making] a person, the Holy One, blessed be He, his father and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye; his mother supplies the semen of the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of the eye; and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him spirit (ruah) and soul (n'shamah), beauty of features, eyesight and the power of hearing, and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart from the world approaches, the Holy One, blessed be He, takes away His share and leaves the shares of his father and mother with them. (B. Niddah 31a//Y. Peah 1:1//Y. Kilayim 8:3//Y. Kiddushin 1:7)

What happens, then, when the father's and mother's portions are left but God's portion is gone? I'm thinking here, specifically, about advanced Alzheimer's, when the brain has actually, physically been damaged.

Discussion Questions:

1. Of all the ways to go, Alzheimer's sometimes seems to me the worst. I taught a psychologist who worked with Alzheimer's patients. Once, he asked patients who were in the early stages, to draw a picture of Alzheimer's. They all drew their own faces, and then erased them. If any of you have experience with this disease, how would you describe it? What is the difference between the early and late stages?
2. Could we frame this issue in terms of freeing the captive? In that case, the disease is the captor and the person is the captive. If that were the case, how could we liberate the captive from their captivity?

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Looking forward to your responses, as always!