

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted December 3, 2008, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

## THE YERUSHALMI, THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND TAKING RISKS

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Rabbinic literature has a great deal to say about dealing with economic adversity. In general, we can't draw any conclusions about one's righteousness and one's bank account. Sometimes the less righteous are richer than the more righteous. Sometimes economic fortunes are simply a wheel, bringing some up and others down, and then reversing the situation later on.

However, the sages do seem to want to encourage caution and discourage excessive risk. Here's how the Yerushalmi puts it:

In the case of a board stretched from one roof to the next, even if it is ever so broad, it is forbidden to walk across it. Why? For on this basis we learn that Satan takes up his prosecution only in a time of danger.

Rav said: He who dwells in a shaky house turns the angel of death into his creditor (i.e., all his past sins are visited on him).

Said Rabbi Levi: In three situations, Satan is waiting to prosecute: he who makes a trip all by himself, he who sleeps by himself in a dark place and he who sets sail on the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean). (Y. Shabbat 2:6)

All these ideas revolve around the idea that, in the normal course of events, one's "sin accounts" are reviewed on Rosh Hashanah. (Something like April 15, for taxes.) But if one engages in risky behaviors, Satan immediately prosecutes a case against you before God. Yes, Satan. We thought him up. He is not this powerful seducer into evil. He's just a guy who brings things to God's attention: sort of a special district attorney for God. So the Yerushalmi is saying that if you take inordinate risks, even risks that seem like a pretty safe bet, you're leaving yourself open for God to evaluate your case and, if you are found wanting, to visit punishment upon you.

It's truly strange that setting sail on the Mediterranean Sea is included in this list as Jews did it so very frequently, especially to pursue business ventures. Otherwise, the threats seem to come from going to risky places, particularly going alone.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. There is no life, certainly no business life, without taking some risks. However, the Yerushalmi seems to advise against taking too many risks and particularly not doing overtly risky things alone. Can you draw any advice for the economic crisis we face from these teachings?
2. If Satan were prosecuting the case against, say, the big three automakers or individual investors who took too great a risk, how would the defending angel make his/her case?
3. Perhaps the best advice we could find now is from Pirkei Avot (which has no Yerushalmi on it): Who is rich? The one who is happy with what he has.