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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 HOLY PLACE WHERE LIFE AND DEATH MEET

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The Holy of Holies in the Temple was entered but once a year on Yom Kippur. The Talmud let's us take a peep at what happened when the High Priest would enter this realm where heaven and earth, life and death, would meet.

Our Rabbis taught: In the year in which Shimon the Righteous died, he foretold them that he would die.

They said: Whence do you know that? He replied: On every Day of Atonement an old man, dressed in white, wrapped in white, would join me, entering [the Holy of Holies] and leaving [it] with me, but today I was joined by an old man, dressed in black, wrapped in black, who entered, but did not leave, with me.

After the festival [of Sukkot] he was sick for seven days and [then] died. His brethren the priests forbore to mention the Ineffable Name in pronouncing the [priestly] blessing. (T. Sotah 13:8//B. Yoma 39b)

First, we have to identify this High Priest, Shimon the Righteous. There is a great deal of controversy about when this particular priest lived. Tosefta Sotah 13:6-8 praises him lavishly and states that in the 40 years that he presided over the Temple the eternal flame and the menorah were faithfully burning and the Yom Kippur ritual it always went off well. After his death, the proper functioning of the cult became less dependable. To him, too, is attributed the saying, "On three things does the world stand: on the Torah and on the sacrificial system and on deeds of lovingkindness (M Avot 1:2)." Historical considerations aside, it is clear that Shimon HaTsaddik was held in great esteem by the priests and the sages.

His yearly foray into the dangerous heart of the Temple was marked by the reassuring presence of what might be called a vision or an angel dressed in white who would safely guide him in and out of the Holy of Holies. With the help of such a guide he could stand coming face-to-face with God's lethal presence and pronounce God's lethal name.

Then Shimon HaTsaddik is guided by a messenger who enters that lethal realm but does not leave; a sign that the High

Priest, too, will soon cross over into the other realm.

Discussion Questions:

1. It is universally assumed in biblical and rabbinic literature that direct contact with God's presence is lethal to all but a select few. How do you explain this? What implications does this have on our relationship with God?
2. The story of the angels seems to suggest that we are never truly alone, even in the most dangerous of places. Have you ever felt the presence of "messengers" who guide you through difficult or dangerous situations?
3. If you knew when you would die how would it change the way you live? If you had known (or if you did know) who your life partner would be ahead of time, would it have changed the way you lived? How?