

The Weekly Daf



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Megilah 7 - 13

Issue # 292 Parshat Ha'azinu

Week of 2 - 8Tishrei 5760 / 13 - 19 September 1999

Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

Secret of the Statue

"What did the Jews do to deserve the threat of annihilation at the hand of Haman?" In response to this question posed by his disciples, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai pointed out that it was retribution for bowing to the statue which the Babylonian King Nevuchadnetzar had set up in the Valley of Dura many years before (*Daniel 7:1-6*). But since they did not do this bowing as a willful act of idol worship, only superficially pretending in order to avoid being cast into the fiery furnace, Hashem reciprocated by only staging a threat of genocide.

Bowing to an idol is one of the cardinal sins which a Jew must avoid even at the cost of his life. How then could an entire nation — except for Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah, who were miraculously untouched by the flames of the furnace into which they were cast for refusing to bow — have been guilty of a forbidden show of idol worship? Why didn't more of them choose martyrdom as required by the Torah?

This question is one of the proofs cited by the great Tosefist, Rabbeinu Tam, for his thesis that the statue of Nevuchadnetzar was not an idol, but merely a means of paying homage to the king. Many people at that time, however, assumed that it was an idol; thus it would have been a sanctification of Hashem's Name for all the Jews to refuse to bow, and their failure to do so brought upon them the trouble with Haman.

An interesting support for this approach is found in the defiant statement of those three Jewish exiles who had achieved important positions in the Babylonian kingdom: "The king should know," said these proud Jews whom the king had renamed Shadrach, Meishach and Avad Nego, "that we shall not worship your gods nor bow to your golden statue." (*Daniel 3:18*) This expresses a clear delineation between idol worship and the bowing to the statue.

The *gemara* elsewhere (*Pesachim 53b*) states that these heroes took their cue from the frogs in Egypt who entered the ovens at Hashem's command in the second plague, even though they were not bound by law to do so.

Megillah 12a

Who is a Jew

"Who is a Jew?" may be a halachic issue of our times. But "Who deserves to be called a *Yehudi*?" is a question which goes back to Megillat Esther and Mesechta Megillah.

Mordechai is introduced in the Megillah as a "*Yehudi*," and when his genealogy is traced he is identified as a "Benjamite." Which tribe is he descended from, asks the *gemara*, Yehuda or Binyamin?

He was from the tribe of Binyamin, explains Rabbi Yochanan, but he is called a *Yehudi* because he denied and defied idol worship. For the name Yehuda is not merely the name of a tribe of Israel. It is the title which was given to Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah when they were reported to Nevuchadnetzar for defying his order to bow to the statue, even though it meant being cast into a fiery furnace. Mordechai earned the title as well for risking his life to defy the royal order to bow to Haman, who had declared himself a deity.

A different resolution is offered by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. Mordechai's father was descended from Binyamin and his mother from Yehuda. He thus inherited the talents required for overcoming the threat of Haman.

Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshitz, in his "*Yaarot Devash*," notes that while Haman's father was an Amalekite, his mother was from another nation. This genealogy provided him with a dual capacity to harm Jewry and he had to be challenged by someone whose own ancestral roots provided the power to overcome these forces.

Mordechai's father was from the tribe of Binyamin, and just as Rachel's progeny was destined to destroy Esav's, the descendants of Binyamin were designated to vanquish the descendant of Amalek. But it is Yehuda who was blessed by his father with the power to overcome all the other enemies of Israel. It was that power, inherited through his mother, which enabled Mordechai to succeed against the power which Haman had on his mother's side.

Megillah 13a

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