

## Six Million Altars

### Gittin 57b

[...] Concerning them the verse states: “On your behalf we are killed all day; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter” (Ps. 44:23).<sup>1</sup>

R. Yehuda said: This verse applies to the woman and her seven sons.<sup>2</sup> They brought in the first of the woman’s sons before the emperor and told him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “I am Hashem your God” (Ex. 20:2). They took him out and killed him.

They brought another son before the emperor, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Ex. 20:3). They took him out and killed him. They brought in another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “He that sacrifices to any god shall be utterly destroyed” (Ex. 22:19). They took him out and killed him.

They brought another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “You shall not bow down to any other god” (Ex. 34:14). They took him out and killed him.

They brought another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One” (Deut. 6:4). They took him out and killed him.

They brought another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “Know therefore this today, and consider it in your heart, that Hashem, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is no other” (Deut. 4:39). They took him out and killed him.

They brought another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: It is written in the Torah: “You have designated Hashem [...] and Hashem has designated you this day” (Deut. 26:17–18). We already took an oath to the Holy One, Blessed be He, saying we will not exchange Him for a different god, and He too has taken an oath to us that He will not exchange us for another nation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gittin 57 also describes that "Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard killed two hundred and eleven myriads, and in Jerusalem he killed ninety-four myriads on one stone, until their blood went and joined that of Zechariah." "The Emperor Vespasian who killed in the city of Beitar four hundred thousand myriads," and "four hundred boys and girls were carried off for immoral purposes ... and drowned themselves in the sea." These stories are concluded with the verse that begins the paragraph cited here, "For Your sake we are killed all day; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter" (Ps. 44:23), a chapter in Psalms that seems appropriate for Yom Hashohah (Holocaust Remembrance Day). However, R. Yehuda associates the verse specifically with a personal story of one family's tragedy, preferring the story of one mother's unfathomable loss to the rivers of spilt blood of millions of Jews (which historically are an exaggeration). Here we will follow R. Yehuda's lead and focus on the personal story as a mirror of the national tragedy.

<sup>2</sup> The course and variants of this story have been discussed extensively; see for example in the appendix of Elisheva Baumgarten and Rella Kushelevsky's paper "[From 'The Mother and Her Sons' to 'The Mother of the Sons' in Medieval Ashkenaz.](#)" The earliest known version of this story is 2 Maccabees, 7, where the story is told in the context of the Maccabean Revolt and the war against the Greeks on Hanukkah; however, that version is very different from the story in Gittin. In both of these versions the mother appears nameless. Closer parallels to the story in Gittin can be found in Eicha Rabbah 1:50; Midrash Zuta on Eicha (Buber) 1 (which may have been an addition by the redactors); Eliyahu Rabbah (Ish Shalom) 28; Midrash Hagadol, Devarim 28:50, and Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillin 873; and Alsheikh's commentary on Tehillim 11. All these versions refer to the mother as Hannah and to the story as 'Hannah and her seven sons.' Perhaps this is a reference to Hannah in the book of Shmuel, "until the barren one birthed seven sons" (1 Sam. 2:5), although presumably she raises them to adulthood (see Pesikta Rabbati 43 and Rashi on the verse, who explains how Hannah birthed seven sons). However, these questions are trivial to the morals derived from the story below.

<sup>3</sup> This is the seventh and youngest son; in Eicha Rabbah he is referred to as שביעאה זוטרא – 'the seventh and youngest.' The theme of the hesitation expressed by the leadership in the face of unceasing murder appears in other stories about the destruction as well, as demonstrated below.

<sup>4</sup> In Eicha Rabbah 1:50 there is a more extensive discussion of the verse in Devarim, and the desecration of the covenant mentioned there: "moreover, we vowed to our God that we would not replace him with another god, as it is written,

The emperor said to him: I will throw down my seal before you; bend over and pick it up, so that<sup>5</sup> they will say 'he has accepted the king's authority.'<sup>6</sup> He said to him: Shame on you, Caesar, the pity goes to you, Caesar. If I should fulfill your command for the sake of your honor, all the more so I should be concerned with the sake of the honor of the Holy One, Blessed be He.

As they were taking him out to be killed, his mother said to them: Give him to me so that I may give him a small kiss. She said to him: My son, go and say to your father Avraham: You bound one son to the altar, but I bound seven altars. She too went up to the roof, fell, and died. A Divine Voice emerged and said: "the mother of the sons is joyous" (Ps. 113:9).<sup>7</sup>

And what can our generation say today to Miriam bat Nahtom? You sacrificed seven sons on the altar, but our generation sacrificed six million. You were given the chance to kiss your youngest son, but many of our mothers were not even awarded that small favor. Your son stood before a Caesar with a modicum of humanity and tried to save him, by giving him a chance to convert, while we stood before blood-thirsty animals. They did not pity us and ask us to pick up a seal to save our lives; they wanted nothing less than utter destruction for every man, woman and child in our nation, even as they knew their evil reign had come to an end. Your Caesar led a nation that wondered where the God of

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'You have designated Hashem [...] this day.' Just as we vowed to him, he promised us that he would not replace us with any other nation, as it is written: 'and Hashem has designated you this day'." See [We designated you, and you designated us](#) in Parashat Ki Tavo, where we cited various interpretations for the phrases הָאֱמֶרֶת-הָאֱמִירָךְ (translated here as 'designated'). It is possible that the text here creates a wordplay between האמרת (designated) and the root אמר (said, stated, or confirmed), which is meant as a statement not for the Caesar, but toward God, as if to say: we have kept our word, but where is yours? How can you stand silent now? As the verse in Psalms 10:1 says: "Why, Hashem, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

<sup>5</sup> The king's seal was engraved with his face, and can be considered either idolatrous or a simple seal, depending on context.

<sup>6</sup> Bowing down to the king, or lifting up a coin engraved with the king's face, are not always considered acts of idolatry (Avodah Zarah 12a); but clearly this was considered a שעת השמד – a time of religious persecution which demands a greater show of commitment to God. Perhaps the Caesar took pity on the small child; the Talmud described Nebuzaradan reflecting on all the blood he spilt and deciding to convert to Judaism (Eicha Rabbah, Petihta 23); but his pity could not stop the process of destruction which was already underway.

<sup>7</sup> The following is the parallel in Eliyahu Rabbah, 28: "He brought the seventh and youngest, and said to him: come bow down to this. He said: God forbid, I would not bow down to something made by human hands; we swore to God that we would not worship another God, and God promised us he would not replace us with another nation ... he said to him, you will not be bowing down to this God, I will throw you the ring and you will lift it up, so that everyone present may say: he obeyed the Caesar and bowed to him. He said: shame on you, Caesar, for telling me to do so. If you are ashamed that I would not obey you in front of these people, would I not be ashamed before the King of Kings? He responded: And is there indeed a God in the world?" This begins a long dialogue about the physicality of the God of Israel, which continues later: "The Caesar said: And does your God have any power? He responded: Is it not written, 'Surely the arm of God is not too short to save' (Is. 59:1). He said: Since your God has power, and seeing eyes, and hearing ears, why would he not show himself and save you from me? The child responses: You fool, you are unworthy that miracles should be performed on your account. We are culpable for death; if you won't kill us, God has many killers, many bears, many tigers, many snakes, many crabs, and many lions who could harm us. The Caesar immediately sentenced him to death. At that time, his mother said: on your life, Caesar, give me my son so I can kiss him. He gave the son over to his mother; she held him and hugged him and kissed him, and gave her breast in his mouth, and honey and milk dripped to the ground, as it is written, 'honey and milk under your tongue' (Song 4:11). She said to him: On your life, Caesar, cut my throat along with my son. Caesar said: God forbid, I would not do that; as the Torah forbids killing a calf and its mother on the same day (Lev. 22:28). The child said: You fool, have you kept the entire Torah except for that verse? They immediately took a sword and cut off his head. The Rabbis calculated the years of that child and found that he was two years and six months old, and seven and a half hours. The nations of the world cried over this and said: what was the father's crime that would merit such a death for his sons? [...] Their mother said to them: My sons, go tell Avraham your father: Do not be arrogant, since you could say you built one altar and sacrificed your son upon it; I built seven altars and sacrificed all seven of my sons. Their mother also said to them: You are blessed, since you have done the will of your Father in Heaven, and your purpose in the world was to sanctify his great name through you, as it is written, "I shall be sanctified through those closest to me" (Lev. 1-:3). She went up to the roof and threw herself off and died. A voice came out and said: "the mother of the sons is joyous" (Ps. 119:9).

Israel was in face of our great tragedy, while we faced a nation that mocked and scorned the God of Israel who failed to save his people. You and your sons sanctified God's name, as the darshan states, while the holocaust was nothing but a desecration of God's name, as Rav Amital taught us.

We urge you, Miriam bat Nahtom, to deliver this message to Avraham, and pass it on to Yitzhak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, and the sages of all generations. Tell Avraham that the great darkness that fell upon him (Gen. 15:12) symbolized not only the oppression of Babylonia, Medes, Greece and even Rome (according to Bereishit Rabbah 44:17), but even more so the darkness of the cursed 'enlightened' Europe of the twentieth century, which successfully annihilated one third of the Jewish people. Their painful extermination included death by sword, suffocation, burning, hanging on every street corner, starvation, sterilization, infectious diseases, gas chamber showers, and other horrific tortures that can only be conjured by the devil. Deliver this message to Avraham, and to the people of Hebron; to Moshe up on Mount Nevo; To Aharon, buried on Hor ha-Har; to Rachel who rests on the road to Beit Lehem; to Yehoshua in Timnat Heres; to Shmuel, David, Shlomo, and the rabbinic leaders in Beit Shearim.

Let them know also that the redemption of Am Yisrael has begun, and let them see the words of Rav Amital in [You have redeemed a nation](#), in the wake of Pesach: "After the great *chillul Hashem* of the Holocaust itself, a historical response of *kiddush Hashem* was required. The establishment of the State and its victory in the War of Independence against the combined Arab armies was a *kiddush Hashem*" (from a talk delivered on Yom Haatzmaut in Yeshivat Har Etzion, 5762).

May we merit comfort and *Kiddush Hashem* 'on the eighth day.'

***Mahalkei Ha-demaot: distributed with tears.***

Mayim Ahronim: For R. Amital's full talk see [Rejoicing Amidst Sorrow](#).