

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [272]

They Did Not Eat Him Because They Are Not Hungry

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39a)



Background of Our Story

Heresy in Judaism - Heretics (Minim)



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heresy_in_Judaism

Jewish heretics (Hebrew *minim*, מינים) are Jewish individuals (often historically, philosophers) whose works have, in part or in whole, been condemned as heretical by significant persons or groups in the larger Jewish community based on the classical teachings of Rabbinic Judaism and derived from *halakha* (Jewish religious law).

The specific rabbinical term for heresies, or religious divisions due to an unlawful spirit, is *minim* (lit. "kinds [of belief]"; the singular "min," for "heretic" or "Gnostic," is coined idiomatically, like "goy" and *am ha'aretz*; see Gnosticism).

Besides the term "min" (מין) for "heretic," the Talmud uses the words "hitzonim" (outsiders), "apikoros," and "kofer ba-Torah", or "kofer ba-ikkar" (he who denies the fundamentals of faith); also "poresh mi-darke tzibbur" (he who deviates from the customs of the community).

The *Birkat haMinim* is a malediction on heretics. The belief that the curse was directed at Christians was sometimes cause for persecution of Jews. Modern scholarship has generally evaluated that the *Birkat haMinim* probably did originally include Jewish Christians before Christianity became markedly a gentile religion.

Daniel Chapter 6

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, to be over the whole kingdom; ²and over these, three governors, of whom Daniel was one, that the satraps might give account to them, so that the king would suffer no loss. ³Then this Daniel distinguished himself above the governors and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king gave thought to setting him over the whole realm. ⁴So

the governors and satraps sought to find *some* charge against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find no charge or fault, because he *was* faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him. ⁵ Then these men said, "We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find *it* against him concerning the law of his God."

⁶ So these governors and satraps thronged before the king, and said thus to him: "King Darius, live forever! ⁷ All the governors of the kingdom, the administrators and satraps, the counselors and advisors, have consulted together to establish a royal statute and to make a firm decree, that whoever petitions any god or man for thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. ⁸ Now, O king, establish the decree and sign the writing, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which ^[a] does not alter." ⁹ Therefore King Darius signed the written decree.

¹⁰ Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.

¹¹ Then these men assembled and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God. ¹² And they went before the king, and spoke concerning the king's decree: "Have you not signed a decree that every man who petitions any god or man within thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?"

The king answered and said, "The thing *is* true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which ^[b] does not alter."

¹³ So they answered and said before the king, "That Daniel, who is ^[c] one of the captives from Judah, does not show due regard for you, O king, or for the decree that you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day."

¹⁴ And the king, when he heard *these* words, was greatly displeased with himself, and set *his* heart on Daniel to deliver him; and he ^[d] labored till the going down of the sun to deliver him. ¹⁵ Then these men ^[e] approached the king, and said to the king, "Know, O king, that *it is* the law of the Medes and Persians that no decree or statute which the king establishes may be changed."

¹⁶ So the king gave the command, and they brought Daniel and cast *him* into the den of lions. *But* the king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver you." ¹⁷ Then a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signets of his lords, that the purpose concerning Daniel might not be changed.

¹⁸ Now the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; and no ^[f] musicians were brought before him. Also his sleep ^[g] went from him. ¹⁹ Then the king arose very early in the morning and went in haste to the den of lions. ²⁰ And when he came to the den, he cried out with a ^[h] lamenting voice to Daniel. The king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"

²¹ Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! ²² My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you."

²³ Now the king was exceedingly glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God.

²⁴ And the king gave the command, and they brought those men who had accused Daniel, and they cast *them* into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives; and the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces before they ever came to the bottom of the den.

²⁵ Then King Darius wrote:

To all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth:

Peace be multiplied to you.

²⁶I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom *men must* tremble and fear before the God of Daniel.

For He *is* the living God,
And steadfast forever;
His kingdom *is the one* which shall not be destroyed,
And His dominion *shall endure* to the end.

²⁷He delivers and rescues,
And He works signs and wonders
In heaven and on earth,
Who has delivered Daniel from the ^[1]power of the lions.

²⁸So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 39a

אָמַר לִיהוֹ קִיסָר לְרַבֵּי תַנְחֻם: "תָּא לִיהוּוּ כּוּלָן לְעַמָּא חַד". אָמַר: "לְתַי, אָנּוּ דְמַהְלִינּוּ לָא מְצִינּוּ מִיהוּוּ כּוּוּתִיכּוּ. אַתּוּן מְהֵלִיתוּ, וְהוּוּ כּוּוּתוּן!" אָמַר לִיהוּ: "מִימַר – שְׁפִיר קְאָמַרְתָּ. מִיְהוּ כָּל דְּזִכִּי לְמַלְכָּא לְשַׁדְיָוָה לְבִיבְר", שַׁדְיָוָה לְבִיבְר, וְלָא אַכְלוּהּ. אָמַר לִיהוּ הָהוּא מִינָא: "הָאִי דְלָא אַכְלוּהּ, מְשׁוּם דְלָא כְּפִין הוּא". שַׁדְיָוָה לִיהוּ לְדִידִיהּ – וְאַכְלוּהּ.

The emperor said to Rabbi Tanhūm: Come, let us all be one people.

Rabbi Tanhūm said: Very well! But we, who are circumcised, cannot become uncircumcised as you are; you all circumcise yourselves and become like us.

The emperor said to Rabbi Tanhūm: In terms of the logic of your statement, you are right, but anyone who bests the king in a debate is thrown to the enclosure of wild animals. They threw him [Rabbi Tanhūm] to the enclosure but the animals did not eat him.

A certain heretic said to the emperor: This incident, that they did not eat him, happened because they are not hungry.

They then threw the heretic into the enclosure and the animals ate him.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why did the emperor say to Rabbi Tanhûm: *"Come, let us all be one people"*?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Rabbi Tanhûm reply to the emperor: *"we, who are circumcised, cannot become as you; you circumcise and become like us"*?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Tanhûm preface his reply to the emperor with the words: "Very well!"?

? How do we know that the emperor is not interested in becoming "one people"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? How do we know that the exchange between the emperor and Rabbi Tanhûm about becoming "one people": was ill intentioned?

Bonus ? Why didn't the animals eat Rabbi Tanhûm?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why did the heretic offer his comment to the emperor?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? In our story there are three characters: Rabbi Tanhûm, the emperor, and the heretic. Both the emperor and the heretic do something mean, but only the heretic is punished. Why?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Snitches get stitches! Or "See what happens when people go out of their way to be mean."

epilogue

In our story, Rabbi Tanhum is the embodiment of the tzadik, the righteous person, who always does the right thing, even under taxing circumstances. In this regard, Rabbi Tanhum follows in the steps of Biblical characters like Ruth, Mordechai, and Daniel. The emperor is the epitome of the anti-Semitic ruler, the unpredictable foreigner oppressor. His behavior, like the one of Rabbi Tanhum, is somehow expected and anticipated. After all, this is what mean emperors usually do.

The heretic, on the other side, stands throughout most of our story, as a simple bystander. The emperor does not confront him, and his religious beliefs are not challenged. As opposed to the emperor, who is, so to speak, "mean by default," the heretic goes -literally- out of his way to do harm, either to be spiteful to Rabbi Tanhum, or most likely to "suck up" to the emperor in the hope of personal gain.

The message of our story is clear: people who go out of their way to do harm or to be mean, end up at the bottom of the pit, being ripped apart by everybody else, figuratively (and sometimes literally), with no love, no respect, and no friends.