

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [54]

This Pierced Him Like the Poison of a Snake (Insights into Genesis Rabbah 65:22)



Background to Our Story

Yakum Ish Tzrorot - Jakum of Zeroroth (Alcimus)

JewishEncyclopedia.com

Alcimus and the Maccabees

Leader of the antinational Hellenists in Jerusalem, under Demetrius I. Soter of Syria (Josephus, "Ant." xi. 9, § 7); born about 200 B.C.; died at Jerusalem 160. He was of priestly family (I Macc. vii. 14). In consequence of the national movement under the Hasmoneans, and of the martial successes of Judas Maccabeus (164-163), the party lost influence and was partially expelled from Jerusalem. Immediately after Demetrius ascended the throne, Alcimus presented himself as a supporter of the imperiled authority of Syria in Judea, and requested the punishment of Judas Maccabeus. Demetrius entrusted Bacchides, the governor of Cœle-syria, with this task, and sent him to install Alcimus in the office of high priest, the object of his ambition. In Judea, because of his priestly rank, Alcimus obtained the confidence of the scribes and the rigidly pious (Assideans), who objected to the conflict on general principles, and, therefore, asked him to bring about peace. Yet, in spite of pledges of safety, he put many of them to death in order to intimidate the rest. Bacchides himself massacred all the followers of Judas Maccabeus who fell into his hands; and committing Judea, with a force sufficient for garrison duty, to the care of Alcimus, he returned to Syria. Alcimus, united now with his Jewish partisans, took up arms against the Maccabees to fight for the supremacy in Judea and for the post of high-priesthood. He could not maintain his position, however, and repaired to the king for assistance (I Macc. vii. 5-25; "Ant." xii. 10, §§ 1, 3; II Macc. xiv. 1-10). In order to restore him to the office of high priest (II Macc. xiv. 13), Demetrius, in the same year (162), dispatched his general Nicanor, who was defeated and killed in an encounter with Judas; and the anniversary, Adar 13, was celebrated in Jerusalem as the Nikanor Day (I Macc. vii. 26-50; "Ant." xii. 10, § 4; II Macc. xiv. 12-xv. 36).

Soon after, Alcimus appeared before Jerusalem with Bacchides, who attacked Judas at Eleasa in such superior numbers that Judas was defeated and slain.

Mention must be made of the legendary account in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 65:22, and in Midrash Tehilim. to 9:7) of Jakim of Zerorot (Zeredah), nephew of Jose, son of Joezer of Zeredah. He is probably identical with Jakim-Alcimus, and is represented as being present when his uncle, who may have been one of the scribes put to death by Alcimus, was led to execution.

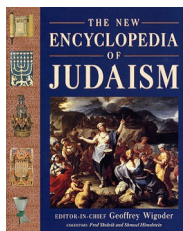
Rabbi Jose ben Jo'ezer of Zeredah – Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer Ish Tzereidah.

JewishEncyclopedia.com

Rabbi of the early Maccabean period; possibly a disciple of Antigonus of Soko, though this is not certain. He belonged to a priestly family. With him and Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem, his colleague, begins the period known in Jewish history as that of the "zugot" (duumvirate), which ends with Hillel and Shammai. According to an old tradition, the member of the "zugot" mentioned first occupied the office of president of the Sanhedrin, while the one mentioned second served in the capacity of vice-president. Jose belonged to the party of the Ḥasidim, and was a decided adversary of Hellenism. To prevent Jews from settling beyond Palestine he declared all heathen countries "unclean" (Shab. 46a). He declared also glass utensils "unclean," probably because they were manufactured in heathen countries. In other respects, however, he was very liberal, and received the surname "Sharaya" ("one who permits") for having rendered three liberal decisions on certain ritual questions ('Eduy. viii. 4; Pes. 15a).

Jose ben Joezer was distinguished for his piety, and is called "the pious of the priesthood" ("ḥasid shebi-kchunnah"; Ḥag. ii. 7). He professed great veneration for scholars, one of his sayings being: "Let thy house be a meeting-place for the wise; powder thyself in the dust of their feet, and drink their words with eagerness" (Abot iv. 4). Jose was probably among the sixty pious men who, at the instigation of the high priest Alcimus, the son of his sister, were crucified by the Syrian general Bacchides (I Macc. vii. 16).

Capital Punishment



The Bible mandates capital punishment for a series of crimes, among them kidnapping, Murder, Idolatry, Desecration of the Sabbath, Blasphemy, Adultery, Incest, and various other sexual offenses. Capital punishment was the standard punishment in the civilizations of the Ancient Near East, and the biblical code clearly believed in its value as a deterrent: "And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shalt you put away the evil from your midst; and all Israel shall hear, and fear" (Deut.21:21). The death penalty was believed also to have a purging effect upon society at large. Thus the institutions charged with dispensing justice were explicitly forbidden to show mercy to those convicted of certain heinous crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and idolatry, and Deuteronomy demands the

death penalty on ten separate occasions with the formulation "and you shall root out the evil from your midst."

Two forms of capital punishment are mentioned directly in the Bible, the more common being stoning, which consisted of all the people hurling stones at the condemned until he died. Although stoning seems to have been the standard biblical form of execution following due process of law (see for instance Lev. 24:23), on several occasions (e.g. Ex. 17:4; Num. 14:10; II Chr. 10:18) it appears as a spontaneous and almost reflexive expression of communal wrath. Thus, stoning seems to have been the expression of *vindicta populi* predating Sinaitic legislation that remained the presumed form of punishment for severe offenses thereafter.

Burning is the specified punishment for two offenses (Lev.20:14 and 21:9). Burning, however, may not have served as a primary form of execution but rather may have been used to attach a special stigma to a particular offense, the corpse of the offender having been burnt after execution by stoning (Josh. 7:25). All three cases of burning mentioned in the Pentateuch are related to sexual offenses. Burning too seems to have been a recognized penalty prior to Sinaitic legislation (Gen. 38:24).

Apparently to heighten the deterrent power of capital punishment, Deuteronomy 21:22 commands that the body of anyone executed for a capital offense be impaled on a stake and left on public display. The following verse, however, forbids leaving the body on display over night, "for he that is hanged is a reproach unto God; that you defile not your land" (Deut. 21:23). In contrast to prevailing Mesopotamian custom according to which an individual could be punished for a crime committed by a member of his family, the Bible limited liability for criminal acts to the perpetrator. Families do not bear collective responsibility for crimes, as is established in Deuteronomy 24:16, "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin [only]." The formulation of this verse suggests that it came to override an existing practice.

Criminal responsibility, and with it capital punishment, extended to animals as well. The ox that gores a human to death (Ex. 25:28-29) as well as the animal involved in bestiality (Lev. 20:16) are to be put to death. This has no parallel in the Ancient Near East and is conceivable only in the religiously based Hebrew legal code.

Talmudic discussions seem to show a shift in attitude towards capital punishment epitomized by the statement of Rabbis Akiva and [Tarfon](#) in the following passage (*Mak.* 1:10). R. Eleazar ben Azariah said that a Sanhedrin that put a man to death even only once in 70 years was considered bloodthirsty. R. Tarfon and R. Akiva said "Had we sat on the Sanhedrin, no one would ever have been executed." The Jewish legal system was clearly confronting the classic tensions regarding the morality and efficacy of capital punishment at this time.

The Talmud indicates, in addition to stoning and burning, two additional forms of execution: slaying (by sword) and strangling. Thus, the Talmud lists four methods of execution, the administration of which was governed by two central principles. The first principle was application of the biblical injunction of "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:17) to the condemned criminal. The operational result of this was the formulation "choose for him the most humane death possible" (*Ket.* 37b, *Sanh.* 45a). The second principle specified that execution be modeled on the taking of life by God: as when God takes a life only the soul is taken while the body remains unharmed, so must the method of execution leave the body unharmed. Thus, for example, stoning no longer consisted of the convicted offender being stoned to death by the people. The offender was killed by being pushed from a high place. The place was to be high enough that death be instantaneous and low enough to ensure that the body not be mutilated by the fall (*Sanh.* 6:4; 45a).

Not only did talmudic law revise the methods of execution, it severely circumscribed the court's ability to convict those accused of capital crimes. A few of the limitations were: capital crimes could be tried only before a court of 23 judges; conviction could be obtained only on the testimony of two eyewitnesses; circumstantial evidence as well as hearsay evidence was inadmissible; witnesses related to each other or to the accused by blood or marriage were disqualified; conviction could not be obtained unless the accused had been warned in advance that his crime was punishable by death and unless he acknowledged the warning verbally. (See also Maimonides, *Yad, Sanh.* 12.)

Thus, where the Bible mandates the death penalty for numerous offenses, believes it to be an effective deterrent, cautions against showing mercy to those convicted, and demands its administration in order to purge society of evil, talmudic law renders the administration of capital punishment practically impossible. The Talmud, of course, derives its regulations from the biblical text by means of the accepted hermeneutical principles. The traditional view, therefore, is that the talmudic attitude is simply the articulation of the Bible's intent. Recent scholars, however, tend to view the talmudic circumscription of capital punishment as a *de facto* reversal of biblical legislation. In any case, the rabbis, despite their leniency in the administration of capital punishment, reserved the right to use its acknowledged deterrent power even when not mandated by the Bible should the general state of society or particular circumstances warrant it (*Sanh.* 46a). Thus Jewish communities, during periods when granted such jurisdiction by the ruling power (e.g., Muslim Spain), continued to administer capital punishment even as punishment for offenses not considered capital crimes by the Bible. The exercise of this power was particularly common with regard to informers (see Maimonides, *Yad, HoveI u-Mazzik* 8:10).

Since the death penalty could be administered only by a qualified Sanhedrin, there is no existing Jewish body considered competent to administer capital punishment today.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the question of the administration of capital punishment by a Jewish court became relevant. Since the new State took over the existing corpus of British mandatory law, the administration of capital punishment was a theoretical possibility. During the first murder trial to be held under Israeli jurisdiction, the Chief Rabbis notified the Minister of Justice of their opposition to the death penalty in the absence of a qualified Sanhedrin. The death penalty was officially abolished in 1954 in the Penal Code Revision Law. Until that time several death sentences were issued, but none was carried out. The death penalty was retained, however, under the Crime of Genocide (Prevention and Punishment) Law and for treason committed in time of war. The prescribed method of execution under the legislation cited is hanging for civilians and shooting for members of the military. In the only instance of capital punishment in the history of the State, Adolf Eichmann, convicted of genocide, was hanged in Ramleh prison in 1962.

Capital Sins Separated by the Four Types of Capital Punishment

Punishment by *skila* (סקילה, stoning)

- Intercourse between a man and his mother.
- Intercourse between a man and his father's wife (not necessarily his mother).
- Intercourse between a man and his daughter in law.
- Intercourse with another man's wife from the first stage of marriage.
- Intercourse between two men.
- Bestiality.
- Cursing the name of God in God's name.
- Idol Worship.

- Giving one's progeny to Molech (child sacrifice).
- Necromancy Sorcery.
- Pythonic Sorcery.
- Attempting to convince another to worship idols.
- Instigating a community to worship idols.
- Witchcraft.
- Violating the Sabbath.
- Cursing one's own parent.
- A stubborn and rebellious son

Punishment by serevah (שריפה, burning)

According to the Halakha, this punishment is conducted by pouring molten metal (lead, or a mixture of lead and tin) into one's throat, rather than burning at the stakes.

- The daughter of a priest who completed the second stage of marriage commits adultery.
- Intercourse between a man and his daughter.
- Intercourse between a man and his daughter's daughter.
- Intercourse between a man and his son's daughter.
- Intercourse between a man and his wife's daughter (not necessarily his own daughter).
- Intercourse between a man and his wife's daughter's daughter.
- Intercourse between a man and his wife's son's daughter.
- Intercourse between a man and his mother in law.
- Intercourse between a man and his mother in law's mother.
- Intercourse between a man and his father in law's mother.

Punishment by hereg (הרג, beheading by sword)

- Unlawful premeditated murder.
- Being a citizen of a city that has gone astray.

Punishment by chenek (חנק, strangulation)

- Committing adultery with another man's wife, when it doesn't fall under the above criteria.
- Wounding one's own parent.
- Kidnapping another Israelite.
- Prophesying falsely.
- Prophesying in the name of other deities.
- A sage who is guilty of insubordination in front of the grand court in the Chamber of the Hewn Stone.

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 65:22

וַיְקוּם אִישׁ צְרוּרוֹת הָיָה בֶן אַחֲוֹתָיו שֶׁל רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֲזֵר אִישׁ צְרִידָה, וְהָיָה רֵכִיב סוּסָא בְּשַׁבְּתָא אֲזַל קוּמֵי שְׂרִיתָא לְמַצְטַבְּלָא, אָמַר לִיה תְּמִי סוּסֵי דְאַרְכְּבֵי מְרִי וְתְמִי סוּסֵי דְאַרְכְּבֵי מְרִי. אָמַר לוֹ אִם כֹּה לְמַכְעִיסֵי קַל וְחֹמֶר לְעוֹשֵׁי רְצוּנוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ עֲשֵׂה אָדָם רְצוּנוֹ יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ, אָמַר לוֹ וְאִם כֹּה לְעוֹשֵׁי רְצוּנוֹ קַל וְחֹמֶר לְמַכְעִיסֵי.

נִכְנַס בּוֹ הַדְּבַר כְּאִרְסֵי שֶׁל עַכְנָא, הִלְךְ וְקָנַם בְּעַצְמוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵיתוֹת בֵּית דִּין, סְקִילָה, שְׂרָפָה, הֶרֶג וְחֲנֹק, מָה עֲשֵׂה, הֵבִיא קוֹרָה נְעֻצָה בְּאַרְצֵי וְקָשֶׁר בָּהּ גִּימָא וְעֵרַף הַעֲצִים וְהִקִּיפֵן גְּדֵר שֶׁל אַבְנִים, וְעֲשֵׂה מְדוּרָה לְפָנָיִךְ וְנַעֲץ אֶת הַחֶרֶב בְּאַמְצֵעַ וְהִצִּיתָ הָאוֹר תַּחַת הַעֲצִים מִתַּחַת הָאֲבָנִים, וְנִתְלָה בְּקוֹרָה וְנִחְנַק, קִדְמָתוֹ הָאֵשׁ, נִפְסְקָה הַנִּימָה, נִפְלַל לְאֵשׁ, קִדְמָתוֹ חָרַב וְנִפְלַל עָלָיו גְּדֵר וְנִשְׂרָף.

וְנִתְמַנְנָם יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֲזֵר אִישׁ צְרִידָה וְרָאָה מִשְׁתּוֹ פְּרָחָה בְּאוֹיֵר, אָמַר בְּשַׁעָה קָלָה קִדְמָנִי זֶה לִגְוֹ עֵדוֹ.

Yakum of Tzrorot was the son of the sister of Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer of Tzereidah. Once he was riding a horse on the Sabbath, and a beam to be used to hang his uncle Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer was passed before him.

[Yakum] said to [Rabbi Yose], "See my horse that my master has given me to ride and see your 'horse' that your Master has given you to ride!"

[Rabbi Yose] said to [Yakum], "If such pleasantness and serenity (as you enjoy) is granted by God to those who anger Him, how much more so will it be granted to those who fulfill His will!"

[Yakum] said to [Rabbi Yose], "Did any man fulfill His will more than you?!"

[Rabbi Yose] said to [Yakum], "And if such hardship (as I am exposed to) is meted out to those who fulfill His will, how much more so will it be meted out to those who anger Him!"

The words of Rabbi Yose penetrated [Yakum] like the burning venom of a snake. So he went and performed on himself the four methods of execution administered by Rabbinical court: stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation. What did he do to accomplish this? He brought a beam, stuck it in the ground and tied a small rope to it. He then set up logs in front of the beam and built a stone wall upon them. He then made a bonfire on the wood in front of [the beam] and stuck a sword in the center of the bonfire. He then lit a fire under the branches that were under the stones. Finally, he hanged himself on the rope attached to the beam and was strangling. The fire preceded his complete strangulation, and the rope snapped as a result of the fire. He then fell into the fire. The effect of the sword preceded his burning, and he was stabbed. The wall of stones then fell upon him, and finally, he was burned.

Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer of Tzereidah was drifting in and out of consciousness and he saw [Yakum's] bier floating in the air. He said, "In one brief moment, this one (Yakum) preceded me in entering into the Garden of Eden!"



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? How do we know from our story that Yakum of Tzrorot was both an apostate and a traitor?

Bonus ? What hints do we have in our story that this was not the first time that Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer and his nephew Yakum of Tzrorot had a theological conversation?

? Upon which "horse" did Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer's master make him ride, according to Yakum of Tzrorot?

? Please explain Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer's first answer to his nephew: "If such pleasantness and serenity (as you enjoy) is granted by God to those who anger Him, how much more so will it be granted to those who fulfill His will!"

? Please explain Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer's second answer to his nephew: "And if such hardship (as I am exposed to) is meted out to those who fulfill His will, how much more so will it be meted out to those who anger Him!"

? Why did Yakum of Tzrorot kill himself with the four methods of execution prescribed by Jewish law?

Answer 1 _____


Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Do you think Yakum of Tzrorot expected to be allowed entry into the Garden of Eden?

Bonus ? The story concludes with the following postscript: Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer of Tzereidah was drifting in and out of consciousness and he saw

[Yakum's] bier floating in the air. He said, "In one brief moment, this one (Yakum) preceded me in entering into the Garden of Eden!" What do you think is the purpose of the postscript in our story?

Extra Bonus  We can assume Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer of Tzereidah tried numerous times before, albeit unsuccessfully, to bring his nephew back to the Jewish fold. What do you think impelled Yakum of Tzrorot's radical change this time?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____



Let's Explore Other Sources

[Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook: Orot haTeshuvah. Chapter 2](#)


Sudden and Gradual Teshuvah

In terms of time, teshuva may be divided into two parts: sudden teshuvah and gradual teshuvah.

Sudden teshuvah comes about as a result of a certain spiritual flash that enters the soul. At once the person senses all the evil and the ugliness of sin and he is converted into a new being; already he experiences inside himself a complete transformation for the better. This sort of teshuvah comes from some influence of inner gift, by some great spiritual influence, that it's worthy to seek its roots in the deepest of mysteries.

There is also a gradual form of teshuvah. No sudden flash of illumination dawns upon the person to make him change from the depth of evil to the good, but he feels that he must mend his way of life, his will, his pattern of thought. By heeding this impulse he gradually acquires the ways of equity, he corrects his morals, he improves his actions, and he conditions himself increasingly to becoming a good person, until he reaches a high level of purity and perfection.

The higher expression of teshuvah comes about as a result of a flash of illumination of the all-good, the divine, the light of Him who abides in eternity. The universal soul, the spiritual essence, is revealed to us in all its majesty and holiness, to the extent that the human heart can absorb it. Indeed, is not the all of existence so good and so noble, and is not the good and the nobility in ourselves but an expression of our relatedness to the all? How then can we allow ourselves to become severed from the all, a strange fragment, detached like tiny grains of sand that are of no value? As a result of this perception, which is truly a divinely inspired perception, comes about teshuvah out of love, in the life of the individual and in the life of society.

 How does Rabbi Kook's insights on the nature of teshuvah help us shed light on our story?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! What makes us change? - “Text and Context” or “the Genesis of Change.”



What makes us change? What does it take to move us from where we are to where we ought to be?

Our story finds Yakum of Tzrorot completely alienated from his Jewish roots. Both an apostate and a traitor, Yakum taunts his uncle, Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer of Tzereidah, as the latter is being led to his execution by the evil rulers who pampered his nephew.

After a short exchange of words between Yakum and Rabbi Yose, Yakum undergoes a total transformation, which leads to his voluntary death, atonement, and the ultimate reward reserved for the righteous.

Since we can assume that Rabbi Yose tried numerous times before to convince his nephew to return to the fold, we must conclude that what compelled Yakum to change was not only the message but the context in which the message was delivered. Rabbi Yose’s faith in God and in His divine justice, on his way to be killed, with nothing to lose, was able to effect the transformation that countless words of admonition didn’t.

Finally, the postscript of our story reminds all of us that no matter how far we go down the wrong road, we can always turn back