

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [62]

**"You Bound on One Altar but I Bound on Seven Altars.
Yours Was Only a Test, but Mine Was for Real!"**

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b & Lamentations

Rabbah 16:50)

Revised: December 2020



Warning to the Reader



"If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning..." (From: *The Bad Beginning*: Book The First, by Lemony Snicket and Brett Helquist)

Background to Our Story

Psalms 44:23

"For Your sake we are killed all the time, we are considered as sheep for slaughter"

"Chana and her Seven Sons" or "The Woman and her Seven Sons"



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_\(Bible\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_(Bible))

Hanna or Chana is also the name of another woman found in the Talmud. The narrative is commonly referred to as "Chana and her seven sons". In 165 BCE, King Antiochos demanded that Chana's seven sons bow down to him, and proclaim him as God. Each of the sons refused to bow down to His Highness, and they were each executed in front of their mother Chana, one by one. When Chana's last son was executed, the pain was unbearable, and she committed suicide. She is remembered with high regard for her religious stead-fastness, teaching her sons to keep to their faith, even if it means execution.



No exact date is given here for this event, nor is mention made of the name of the emperor who issued the decree, although the context indicates that it was Hadrian. This story is brought in the ancient sources in different versions. It is told in the Second Book of Hasmoneans (chapter 7) and in greater detail in the Fourth Book of Hasmoneans (chapters 8–17). There it is reported that the incident took place in Antioch during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Hanukkah



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>

From the Hebrew word for "dedication" or "consecration", Hanukkah marks the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the forces of the King of Syria Antiochus IV Epiphanes and commemorates the "miracle of the container of oil". According to the Talmud, at the re-dedication following the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid Empire, there was only enough consecrated olive oil to fuel the eternal flame in the Temple for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days, which was the length of time it took to press, prepare and consecrate fresh olive oil.

Hanukkah is also mentioned in 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees. The first states: "For eight days they celebrated the rededication of the altar. Then Judah and his brothers and the entire congregation of Israel decreed that the days of the rededication... should be observed... every year... for eight days. (1 Mac. 4:56–59)" According to 2 Maccabees, "the Jews celebrated joyfully for eight days as on the feast of Booths."

The martyrdom of Hannah and her seven sons has also been linked to Hanukkah. According to a Talmudic story and 2 Maccabees, a Jewish woman named Hannah and her seven sons were tortured and executed by Antiochus for refusing to worship an idol, which would have been a violation of Jewish law.

Chanukah and Heroines



<http://wujs.org.il/>

Midrash on the breakout of the rebellion: The Marriage of Hannah, Daughter of Mattathias

As part of their campaign to break the spirit of the Jews, the Greeks decreed that every maiden must spend her wedding night in the bed of the regional governor, and that only afterward would she be permitted to her husband. As a result of this decree, the Jews stopped marrying. For three years and three months, no wedding was held in Judea. Then it came time for Hannah, daughter of Mattityahu the Hasmonean to marry. In spite of the decree, Mattityahu held a great celebration, inviting the leaders of the nation, for Mattathias' family was extremely prominent. The bride sat, as was customary, at the head table, but suddenly stood up, clapped her hands together, and tore her expensive wedding dress, exposing herself. Everyone looked away in embarrassment, and her brothers ran to fall upon her and kill her for shaming herself and her family.

But Hannah said to them, "Why, when I shame myself before my relatives and friends are you so filled with embarrassment and anger that you wish to kill me, but you agree to surrender me this night so the heathen governor can lie with me? Why do you not learn from Simon and Levy, sons of our forefather Jacob, who avenged the rape of their sister Dinah (in Genesis, chapter 34)?"

Everyone realized that Hannah was right; her brothers discussed the matter and came to a decision. They dressed their sister in the finest garments and brought her with great ceremony, at the head of a large procession, to the King. Hannah's brothers declared, "We are the sons of the High Priest, and it is not fitting that our sister be given to the governor. Our sister is fit only for the King himself!" The brothers' words found favor in the King's eyes.

The brothers accompanied Hannah to the royal bed chamber, and thereupon, seized the King and killed him. Afterward, they stormed out killing ministers, guards, and servants, who were in the palace. So began the Hasmonean revolt.

(M. Y. Ben Gurion, *miMekor Yisrael* 1; Y. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Midrashim: Hannukah*)

Judith and Holofernes

Judith was a beautiful woman who single-handedly saved the Jewish town of Bethulia during the Hasmonean revolt. Holofernes was an evil Syrian general who laid siege to the town.

All seems lost until the widow, Judith, tells the town's elders that she has a plan to defeat the enemy. At first, the elders scoff at her, but as the situation becomes increasingly desperate, they finally allow her to leave the camp for one day.

She dresses provocatively and prepares a sack of food and wine. She approaches the enemy camp and is immediately captured and brought before Holofernes. Impressed with her beauty and her prediction of his defeat of the Jews, he invites her to celebrate with him alone.

When alone with Holofernes, Judith feeds him with salty cheese, which induces the general to drink and finally sleep. She then takes his sword, cuts off his head, and returns from the slumbering enemy camp to Bethulia. When the Greek troops see the head of their leader hanging from the town's walls, they lose heart and retreat. The siege was over.

The requirement of self-sacrifice



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-sacrifice_in_Jewish_law

Yehareg ve'al ya'avur ("Let him be killed rather than transgress") refers to the requirement to give one's life rather than transgress a law. Although ordinarily one is permitted to transgress halakha when a life is in danger, certain situations require one to give his life.

Three exceptional sins

There are three sins for which one is always required to die rather than transgress:

- idolatry
- severe sexual misconduct (sexual immorality prohibited by Torah)

- murder

The above three are ruled as being exceptions by the Talmud. In tractate Sanhedrin 74a, the Talmud records: "Rav Yochanan said in the name of Rav Shimon ben Yehotzadak: 'It was decided by a vote in the loft of the house of Nitezeh in Lod: For all the sins in the Torah, if a man is told, 'Transgress and you will not be killed,' he should transgress and not be killed, except for idol worship, sexual relations and bloodshed.'" A Jew must sacrifice his/her life rather than transgress the above-mentioned sins.

Idolatry

The first exception, idolatry, is extrapolated from Deuteronomy 6:5 "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might", meaning that one should even surrender his soul rather than serve any divinity aside from God.

There is a famous example that can be found in the Babylonian Talmud Gittin 57b, the apocryphal II Maccabees 7, and other sources about Hannah and her seven sons, a story associated with the holiday of Hanukkah. Rather than prostrate before an idol of Zeus placed in the Second Temple, Hannah defies the Greek-Assyrian King Antiochus IV and allows her sons to be killed one by one before she herself is killed.

Signet Rings



Binding of Isaac



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binding_of_Isaac

The Binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22:1-24, is a story from the Hebrew Bible in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah.

The narration is referred to as the *Akedah* or *Akedat Yitzchak* in Hebrew. According to the narration, Abraham sets out to obey God's command without questioning. After Isaac is bound to an altar, the angel of God stops Abraham at the last minute, at which point Abraham discovers a ram caught in some nearby bushes. Abraham then sacrifices the ram in Isaac's stead.



The Sacrifice of Isaac: 1542–1544 by Titian



Laurent de LaHire: Abraham Sacrificing Isaac 1650

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b & Lamentations

Rabbah 16:50

ועליהם הכתוב אומר: "כי עליך הרגנו כל היום נחשבנו כצאן טבחה".
ורב יהודה אמר: זו אשה ושבעה בניה; אתיוהו קמא לקמיה דקיסר, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "אנכי ה' אלהיך", אפקוהו וקטלוהו. ואתיוהו לאידך לקמיה דקיסר, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני", אפקוהו וקטלוהו. אתיוהו לאידך, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "זובח לאלהים יחרם", אפקוהו וקטלוהו.
אתיוהו לאידך, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "לא תשתחוה לאל אחר", אפקוהו וקטלוהו. אתיוהו לאידך, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד", אפקוהו וקטלוהו. אתיוהו לאידך, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "וינדעת היום והשבות אל לבבך פי ה' הוא האלהים בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת אין עוד", אפקוהו וקטלוהו. אתיוהו לאידך, אמרו ליה: פלח לעבודה זרה! אמר להו, כתוב בתורה: "את ה' האמרת וגו' וה' האמירך היום", כבר נשבענו להקדוש ברוך הוא שאין אנו מעבירין אותו באל אחר, ואף הוא נשבע לנו שאין מעביר אותנו באומה אחרת.

אמר ליה קיסר: אישדי לך גושפנקא וגחין ושקליה, פי היכי דלימרו קביל עליה הרמנא דמלכא, אמר ליה: תבל עלך קיסר, תבל עלך קיסר, על כבוד עצמך כה, על כבוד הקדוש ברוך הוא על אחת כמה וכמה!

אפקוהו למיקטליה, אמרה להו אימיה: יהבוהו גיהלי ואינשקיה פורתא, אמרה לו: בניי, לכו ואמרו לאברהם אביכם: אתה עקדת מזבח אחד ואני עקדתי שבעה מזבחות! אף היא עלתה לגג ונפלה ומתה. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: "אם הבנים שמחה".

Concerning them and others like them the verse states: "As For Your sake we are killed all the day long; we are reckoned as sheep for the slaughter" (Psalms 44:23).

And Rav Yehuda said: This verse applies to the woman and her seven sons.

The incident occurred as follows: They brought in the first of the woman's sons before the emperor and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2). They immediately took him out and killed him.

And they then brought in another son before the emperor, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Exodus 20:3). And so they took him out and killed him.

They then brought in yet another son before the emperor, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "He that sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 22:19). And so they took him out and killed him.

They then brought in another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "You shall not bow down to any other god" (Exodus 34:14). And so they took him out and killed him.

They then brought in yet another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4). And so they took him out and killed him.

They then brought in another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "Know therefore this today, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:39). And so they took him out and killed him.

They then brought in yet another son, and said to him: Worship the idol. He said to them: I cannot do so, as it is written in the Torah: "You have avouched the Lord this day to be your God... and the Lord has avouched you this day to be a people for His own possession" (Deuteronomy 26:17-18). We already took an oath to the Holy One, Blessed be He, that 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.

The emperor said to him [to the youngest son]: I will throw down my seal before you; bend over and pick it up, so that people will say that he has accepted the king's authority.

The boy said to him: Woe to you, Caesar, woe to you, Caesar. If you think that for the sake of your honor I should fulfill your command and do this, then for the sake of the honor of the Holy One, Blessed be He, all the more so should I fulfill His command.

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 Abraham, You bound one son to the altar, but I bound seven altars. She too in the end went up to the roof, fell, and died. A Divine Voice emerged and said: "A joyful mother of children" (Psalms 113:9).



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What do you think is the purpose of our story (and similar ones) in the Talmudic narrative?

? Why does the emperor order the seven sons to worship the idol?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why don't the seven sons worship the idol?

? Why does the emperor bring the mother to witness the execution?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why does the emperor kill the sons one by one as opposed to all of them together?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? The emperor says to the last son: "I will throw down my seal before you; bend over and pick it up, so that people will say that he (a reference to the boy) has accepted the king's authority." How is Caesar portrayed in our story?

? Why doesn't the last son agree to bend down to pick up the emperor's seal?

Bonus ? Why doesn't the emperor kill the mother at the end?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why does the mother go up on a roof and kill herself?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem

Page 326

She too went up to the roof – אף היא עלתה לגג : There are those who ask why it was permitted for this woman to kill herself, and they present different answers to the question. According to the Meiri, she sensed that she too would be commanded to engage in idol worship, and so she killed herself first.

Extra Credit ? The woman tells her last son: "My sons; go and say to your father Abraham..." What is implicit in her words?

? According to the editor of our story, why does “this mother” of children rejoice?

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

! My pain is greater than yours! Or “When the ‘other’s story’ doesn’t help us”

! When defending your convictions comes at a heavy price: the Hanukkah story they didn’t tell us in Sunday School.



Our story is a typical story of martyrdom, of which the Talmud has many. It is noteworthy that other oppressed peoples have similar stories as part of their collective memory.

In this particular story, the emperor kills seven sons, one after the other, as they refuse to bow down to an idol.

Our story is a somber reminder that Hanukkah is not about dreidels, latkes, and decorations but about a taxing fight for religious freedom, a freedom that, as we can see, is far from free.

At the end of our story, the suffering mother thrusts onto our Father Abraham that her trial and suffering were greater than his, trying to find in her last words, a modicum of little and inadequate comfort, which is always the case in “my pain is greater than yours” argument.

Appendix 1: Our Story in the Book of Maccabees

LIVIUS: Articles on Ancient History

<https://www.livius.org/>

The *Second Book of Maccabees* describes the struggle of the Jews for religious, cultural, and political independence against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek who sympathized with the hellenization of Judah. It is slightly ironic that the anonymous author of *The Second Book of Maccabees* wrote a *history* to make his point, because this literary genre was invented by Greeks.

2 Maccabees 7

1 It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king ([Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#)), under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. **2** One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers."

3 The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. **4** These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. **5** When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, **6** "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song which bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, `And he will have compassion on his servants.'" (Deuteronomy 32.36)

7 After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" **8** He replied in the language of his fathers, and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. **9** And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."

10 After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, **11** and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." **12** As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

13 When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. **14** And when he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by Him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

15 Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. **16** But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among men, mortal though you are, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. **17** Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!"

18 After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, **19** "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things

have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!"

20 The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. 21 She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, 22 "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. 23 Therefore the Creator of the world, Who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in His mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

24 Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his fathers, and that he would take him for his friend and entrust him with public affairs. 25 Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. 26 After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. 27 But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native tongue (Aramaic) as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. 28 I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being. 29 Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers."

30 While she was still speaking, the young man said, "What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our fathers through Moses. 31 But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. 32 For we are suffering because of our own sins. 33 And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, He will again be reconciled with His own servants. 34 But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all men, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. 35 You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. 36 For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. 37 I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by afflictions and plagues to make you confess that He alone is God, 38 and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation."

39 The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, the mother died, after her sons. 40 Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures.

Appendix 2

Spiegel, Shalom (1967). *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac As a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (1993 reprint ed.). Jewish Lights Publishing.