

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 [96]

At that moment, thoughts of repentance entered his mind...

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b

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Background to Our Story

Nevuzadaran

◆ AI Overview

Nebuzaradan was the commander of the Babylonian imperial guard under King Nebuchadnezzar II. He is best known for leading the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 587–586 BC, burning the Temple, and deporting much of the Jewish population to Babylon. He also notably protected and freed the prophet Jeremiah.

Destruction of Jerusalem: Acting under Nebuchadnezzar's orders, Nebuzaradan arrived in Jerusalem after its walls were breached. He set fire to the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all major buildings.

The Exiles: He systematically dismantled the city walls, seized the Temple's gold and bronze treasures, and deported the majority of the surviving population to Babylon. He left only the poorest citizens behind to tend the vineyards and fields. Five years later, he returned to deport an additional 745 people.

Protecting Jeremiah: Nebuchadnezzar commanded Nebuzaradan to look after the prophet Jeremiah. Nebuzaradan found Jeremiah in chains with other captives in Ramah, released him, and gave him the choice to either go to Babylon under his protection or stay in the devastated homeland. Jeremiah chose to stay.

Historical & Linguistic Significance

- Title: In the Bible, he is referred to as sar haṭabbāḥīm, which translates to "captain of the guard" or "chief executioner".

- Archaeological Evidence: Babylonian cuneiform records—such as a clay prism found in the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's palace—list a court official named Nabû-zēr-iddina (the Babylonian equivalent of Nebuzaradan) with the title of chancellor, confirming his historical existence.

You can read more about his actions and campaigns in the biblical books of 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 39.

- On the fifth month, on the seventh of the month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, an official of the Babylonian king, arrived in Jerusalem.4 - 2 Kings 25:8
- Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, then took as exiles those who remained in the city, along with the rest of the people and the troops who had declared their allegiance to the king of Babylon. - 2 Kings 25:11
- Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, also took the fire pans and basins, and all the other utensils made of pure gold or silver. - 2 Kings 25:15
- Nebuzaradan the commander took them all to the king of Babylon at Riblah. - 2 Kings 25:20
- Then Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, sent to Babylon the remnant of the population as well as those who had defected to him. - Jeremiah 39:9
- But Nebuzaradan left a few of the poorest people in Judah, and he assigned them fields and vineyards to care for. - Jeremiah 39:10
- King Nebuchadnezzar had told Nebuzaradan to find Jeremiah. - Jeremiah 39:11
- So Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, and Nebushazban, a chief officer, and Nergal-sharezer, the king's adviser, and the other officers of Babylon's king - Jeremiah 39:13
- The LORD gave a message to Jeremiah after Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, had released him at Ramah. He had found Jeremiah bound in chains among the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being sent to exile in Babylon. - Jeremiah 40:1
- If you decide to stay, then return to Gedaliah son of Ahikam and grandson of Shaphan. He has been appointed governor of Judah by the king of Babylon. Stay there with the people he rules. But it's up to you; go wherever you like." Then Nebuzaradan gave Jeremiah some food and money and let him go. - Jeremiah 40:5
- Ishmael made captives of the king's daughters and the other people who had been left under Gedaliah's care in Mizpah by Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard. Taking them with him, he started back toward the land of Ammon. - Jeremiah 41:10
- In the crowd were men, women, and children, the king's daughters, and all those whom Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, had left with Gedaliah. Also included were the prophet Jeremiah and Baruch. - Jeremiah 43:6
- On the tenth day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, an official of the Babylonian king, arrived in Jerusalem.4 - Jeremiah 52:12

- Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, then took as exiles some of the poorest of the people and those who remained in the city, along with the rest of the craftsmen and the troops who had declared their allegiance to the king of Babylon. - [Jeremiah 52:15](#)
- But Nebuzaradan allowed some of the poorest people to stay behind in Judah to care for the vineyards and fields. - [Jeremiah 52:16](#)
- Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, also took the small bowls, fire pans, basins, pots, lamp stands, dishes, bowls used for drink offerings, and all the other utensils made of pure gold or silver. - [Jeremiah 52:19](#)
- Nebuzaradan the commander took them all to the king of Babylon at Riblah. - [Jeremiah 52:26](#)
- In his twenty-third year he sent Nebuzaradan, his captain of the guard, who took 745 more--a total of 4,600 captives in all.3 - [Jeremiah 52:30](#)

Zechariah



Grintz, Yehoshua M., and Joseph Heinemann. "Zechariah." [Encyclopedia Judaica](#). Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 21. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 481-482. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

Zechariah, the priest, son of Jehoiada. According to II Chronicles 24:20–22, Zechariah admonished the people in the courtyard of the Temple. They plotted against him and stoned him at the command of [Joash](#), king of Judah. The latter had forgotten that Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had once saved his life and made him king (II Chron. 22:11ff.). As Zechariah died, he said: "May the Lord see it and avenge it." (The historicity of the incident is questioned by H.L. Ginsberg.) The tombstone over the alleged grave of Zechariah son of Jehoiada stands in the Valley of Kidron opposite the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The Torah Court Jewish System

♦ AI Overview

The court system during the Talmudic era was a highly organized, three-tiered judicial framework centered around rabbinic courts known as a Beth Din. Grounded heavily in biblical law and detailed extensively in the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, this system relied on ordained judges who held religious, legislative, and judicial authority.

The Three Tiers of the Court System

The jurisdiction and size of each court were determined by the severity of the cases they handled:

- The Great Sanhedrin (71 Judges): This was the supreme legal and religious authority of ancient Israel. Situated in the Temple compound in Jerusalem, it ruled on national crises, tried the High Priest, dealt with false prophets, acted as a supreme court of appeals, and maintained legislative powers like declaring an offensive war.
- The Lesser Sanhedrin (23 Judges): Established in any town with a population of 120 or more, these tribunals held exclusive jurisdiction over capital cases involving corporate or death penalties.

- The Local Beth Din (3 Judges): Operating at the grassroots level in every community, these courts handled civil litigation, property disputes, personal injury, theft, and minor penalties. These courts traditionally convened on Mondays and Thursdays (local market days).

Naaman



Naaman was a commander of the armies of Ben-Hadad II in the time of Joram, king of Israel. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 5 of the Tanakh. According to the narrative, he was afflicted with tzaraath. When the Hebrew slave-girl who waits on his wife tells her of a prophet in Samaria who can cure her master, he obtains a letter from Benhadad to Joram in which the former asks Joram to arrange for the healing of his subject Naaman. Naaman proceeds with the letter to Joram. The king of Israel suspects in this — to him — impossible request a pretext of Syria for later starting a war against him and tears his clothes. When the prophet Elisha hears about this, he sends for Naaman. But rather than personally receiving Naaman when the latter arrives at Elisha's house, Elisha merely sends a messenger to the door who tells Naaman to cure his illness by dipping himself seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman, who had expected the prophet himself to come out to him and perform some kind of impressive ritual magic, angrily refuses, and prepares to go home unhealed. Only after Naaman's slaves suggest to their master that he has nothing to lose by at least giving it a try, he does as told and finds himself healed. Naaman returns to Elisha with lavish gifts, which Elisha flatly refuses to accept. Naaman also renounces his former god Rimmon after being cured by Elisha and accepts the God of Israel.

Haman



Haman (Also known as Haman the Agagite, or Haman the evil) is the main antagonist in the Book of Esther, who, according to tradition, was a 5th Century BC

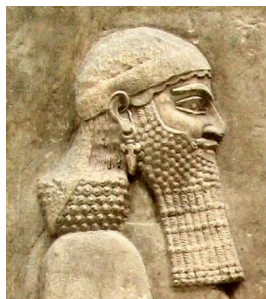
noble and vizier of the Persian empire under King Ahasuerus, traditionally identified as Artaxerxes II .). Haman is described as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite. In the story, Haman and his wife Zeresh instigate a plot to kill all of the Jews of ancient Persia. Haman attempts to convince Ahasuerus to order the killing of Mordecai and all the Jews of the lands he ruled. The plot is foiled by Queen Esther, the king's recent wife, who is herself a Jew. Haman is hanged from the gallows that had originally been built to hang Mordechai.

Sisera



Sisera (Hebrew: סִיסְרָא) was the captain of the Canaanite army of King Jabin. He is mentioned in the Judges 4:2 in the Hebrew Bible. In the times of the Israelite Judges, Sisera was the captain of the army of Jabin, king of Canaan. According to Judges 4:3, Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots and oppressed the Israelites for twenty years from Harosheth Haggoyim a fortified cavalry base. Judges 4:2 The leadership of the Israelite tribes at the time fell to the prophetess Deborah. She persuaded Barak to face Sisera in battle. This he did and Sisera's army was routed and destroyed by an Israelite force of ten thousand under Barak on the plain of Esdraelon. (Judges 4:10-13)

Sancheriv (Sennacherib)



Sennacherib was the son of Sargon II, whom he succeeded on the throne of Assyria (705 – 681 BC).

The Biblical account of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem begins with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its capital Samaria. This is how the ten northern tribes came to be known as the Ten Lost Tribes, because as recorded in II Kings 17, they were carried off and settled with other peoples as was the Assyrian

policy. II Kings 18-19 (and parallel passage II Chronicles 32:1-23) details Sennacherib's attack on Judah and capital Jerusalem. Hezekiah had rebelled against the Assyrians, so they had captured all of the towns in Judah. Hezekiah realized his error and sent great tribute to Sennacherib. But the Assyrians nevertheless marched toward Jerusalem. Sennacherib sent his supreme commander with an army to besiege Jerusalem while he himself went to fight with the Egyptians. The supreme commander met with Hezekiah's officials and told them to surrender; while hailing insults so the people of the city could hear, blaspheming Judah and particularly the Lord. When King Hezekiah heard of this, he tore his clothes (as was the custom of the day for displaying deep anguish) and prayed to the Lord in the Temple. Isaiah the prophet told the king that the Lord would take care of the whole matter. That night, the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian troops. Jewish tradition maintains that archangel Gabriel (along with Michael in the Targum's version) was the angel sent to destroy the Assyrian troops, and that the destruction occurred on Passover night. Sennacherib soon returned to Nineveh in disgrace.

Shemayah and Avtalyon.

Answers.com

(1st cent. BCE). The fourth of the five Zugot, the pairs of sages who linked the Maccabean era with that of the tannaim. Traditionally, Shemayah and Avtalyon were either converts or descendants of converts, tracing their ancestry back to the Assyrian king Sennacherib (Git. 57b). Shemayah was president of the Sanhedrin (Nasi), while Avtalyon was the head of the law court (av bet din).. No halakhic dicta are recorded in their names, but both are quoted in Avot. Shemayah stated, "Love labor and shun power, and do not become close to the authorities" (1:10); this may well be a reference to Herod, during whose reign Shemayah lived. Avtalyon declared, "O sages, be careful with your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and you will be exiled to the place of bad waters [i.e., heresy]. Then the students who follow you will drink and die" (1:11).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 57b

אמר רבי חייא בר אבין אמר רבי יהושע בן קרחה: סח לי זמן אחד מאנשי ירושלים: בבקשה זו הרג נבונאדון רב טבחים מאתם ואחת עשרה רבוא, ובירושלים הרג תשעים וארבע רבוא על אבן אחת, עד שקהל דמן ונגע בדמו של זכריה, לקיים מה שנאמר: "וְדָמִים בְּדָמִים נִגְעוּ".

אשכחיה לדמיה דזכריה דהנה קא מרמח וסליק, אמר: מאי האי? אמרו ליה: דם זבחים דאשתפוד. אייתי דמי ולא אידמו, אמר להו: אי אמריתו לי – מוטב, ואי לא – מסרינקא לבשרינכו במסרקן דפרזל. אמרין ליה: מאי גימא לך, נבייא הנה בן דהנה קא מוכח לן במילי דשמאי, קמינן עילוייה וקטלינן ליה, והא כמה שניין דלא קא גיית דמיה.

אמר להו: אנא מפייסנא ליה. אייתי סנהדרי גדולה וסנהדרי קטנה קטל עילוייה ולא נח, בחורים ובתולות קטל עילוייה ולא נח, אייתי תינוקות של בית רבן קטל עילוייה ולא נח, אמר ליה: זכריה, זכריה, טובים שבען איבדתי, גיחא לך דאבדינהו לכולהו? כדאמר ליה הכי, נח.

בההיא שעתא הרהר תשובה בדעתיה, אמר: ומה אם על נפש אחת – כן, והוא גברא דקטל כל הני נשמתא – על אחת כמה וכמה! ערק אזל שדר שטר פרטתא בביתיה ואגזיר

תָּנָא: נַעֲמָן גַּר תּוֹשֵׁב הָיָה; נְבוּזַרְאֲדָן גַּר צִדְקָה הָיָה. מִבְּנֵי בְנֵי שָׁל הָמָן לְמַדּוּ תוֹרָה בְּבְנֵי בְרַק; מִבְּנֵי בְנֵי שָׁל סִיסְרָא לְמַדּוּ תִּינוּקוֹת בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם; מִבְּנֵי בְנֵי שָׁל סִנְחַרִּיב לְמַדּוּ תוֹרָה בְּרַבִּים. מֵאַן אֵינוֹן? שְׂמַעְיָה וְאַבְטָלְיוֹן.

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin says that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa says: An old man from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem related to me: In this valley that lies before you, Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, killed 2,110,000 people. And in Jerusalem itself he killed 940,000 people on one stone, until the blood of his victims flowed and touched the blood of Zechariah to fulfill what is stated: "And blood touches blood" (Hosea 4:2).

The Gemara clarifies the details of what happened: Nebuzaradan found the blood of Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada the priest, and saw that it was bubbling up from the ground, and he said: What is this? Those in the Temple said to him: It is sacrificial blood that had been poured there. He brought animal blood, compared it to the blood bubbling up from the ground, and saw that it was not similar to it.

Nebuzaradan said to them: If you tell me whose blood this is, it will be well for you. But if not, I will comb your flesh with iron combs.

They [those in the Temple] said to him: What shall we say to you? He was a prophet among us, who used to rebuke us about heavenly matters, and we rose up against him, and killed him (II Chronicles 24:20–22), and for many years now his blood has not settled.

Nebuzaradan said to them: I will appease Zechariah.

He brought the members of the Great Sanhedrin and of a lesser Sanhedrin and killed them alongside the bubbling blood, but it still did not settle. He then brought young men and virgins and killed them alongside it, but it still did not settle. He then brought schoolchildren and killed them alongside it, but it still did not settle.

Finally, Nebuzaradan said to him: Zechariah, Zechariah, I have killed the best of them. Would it please you if I destroyed them all? When he said this, the blood at last settled.

At that moment thoughts of repentance entered his mind [Nebuzaradan's mind], and [he] said to himself: If, for the death of one soul, that of Zechariah, God punishes the Jewish people in this manner, then that man, that is to say, I, who has killed all of those souls, all the more so will I be subject to great punishment from God.

He fled, sent to his house a document detailing what was to be done with his property, and converted to Judaism.

A Sage taught a baraita relating to this matter: Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram (see II Kings, chapter 5), was not a full convert, as he did not accept all of the mitzvot, but rather he was a ger toshav, a gentile who resides in Eretz Israel and observes the seven Noahide mitzvot.

Nebuzaradan, by contrast, was a (full) convert, as explained previously.

The Gemara adds that some of Haman's descendants studied Torah in Bnei Brak, and some of Sisera's descendants taught children Torah in Jerusalem, and some of Sennacherib's descendants taught Torah in public. Who are they? They are Shemaya and Avtalyon, the teachers of Hillel the Elder.



Explaining the Story

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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus Why is the introduction to our story important: "Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Avin says that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa says: An old man from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem related to me: In this valley that lies before you, Nebuzaradan...."?

Why was Zechariah's blood boiling and bubbling on the Temple floor?

Bonus Why did the priests lie telling Nevuzadaran that the boiling and bubbling blood was blood from sacrifices when he asked them about the nature of the blood?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

What did Nevuzadaran do to corroborate that the priests were not lying to him?

Bonus What prompted the priests to tell Nevuzadaran the truth about the bubbling blood?

What did Nevuzadaran do to appease the bubbling blood of Prophet Zechariah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

How did the blood come to rest at last?

Bonus At what moment “thoughts of repentance” entered the mind of Nevuzadaran? What is the connection between “that moment” and Nevuzadaran’s repentance?

Bonus Why did Nevuzadaran flee?

Bonus Why did he send a document instructing his household what to do with his property?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

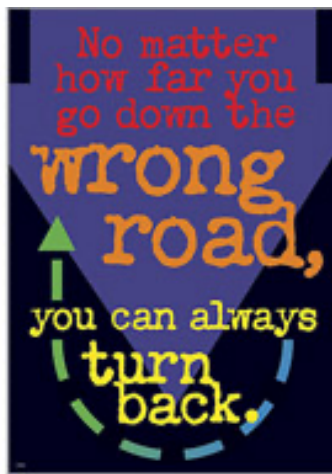
Extra Bonus How do we know that Nevuzadaran’s conversion was sincere?

Please explain: “A Tanna taught in a Baraita: Naaman was a resident convert. Nevuzadaran was a righteous convert. Descendants of Haman taught Torah in Bnei Barak. Descendants of Sisera taught children in Jerusalem. Descendants of Sancheriv taught Torah in public. Who were they? Shemayah and Avtalyon.”

Extra Bonus Why do you think the story doesn’t tell us if and how Nevuzadaran was punished for the millions of people killed in Jerusalem?

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

Did you get the message?



Our story—one of my favorite ones in the Talmud—showcases the radical point of view of the Sages about repentance and change. Everyone can repent. Everyone can change. Everyone! If Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, repented, we can repent as well. If Na’aman, the commander of the armies of the king of Aram, saw the light, so can we.

In addition, the end of our story reminds us that the history of our parents and ancestors doesn’t define us. If Haman and Sisera’s descendants were Torah scholars, each of us can become one.