

# Yosef and Rabbi Yishmael

On the Ninth of Av, we read the kinah *Arzei Halevanon* (#21) about the Ten Martyrs and their deaths at the hands of the Romans. More detail is provided in the *Eleh Ezkerah* prayer recited during the chazan's repetition of mussaf on Yom Kippur. Both *Arzei Halevanon* and *Eleh Ezkerah* are based on versions of the "*Asarah Harugei Malkhut*" (The Ten Martyrs) account in *Midrash Asarah Harugei Malkhut* and other later midrashim.<sup>1</sup> These prayers provide detailed descriptions of the torture and martyrdom of the Ten Rabbis in the period after the Second Temple's destruction; the rabbis include Raban Shimon b. Gamliel, R. Yishmael the Kohen Gadol, R. Haninah b. Teradion, R. Hutzpit the Meturgeman, R. Elazar b. Shamua, R. Hanina b. Hakinai, R. Yesheivav the Scribe, R. Yehudah b. Dama, and R. Yehudah b. Baba. They are executed by the Roman emperor as "punishment" for Joseph's sale by his ten brothers (Genesis 37).

The focus of the two tefillot is different; the kinah is recited while we are sitting on the floor, lamenting the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and the loss of our sages, while the tefillah on Yom Kippur is said to remind us about the essence of the day, our request to God to forgive our sins. In addition, the purposes and objectives for the recital of the story on Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur are different. On Yom Kippur, the story of the Ten Martyrs is recited because our sages tell us (*Moed Katan* 18a) that the death of the righteous serves as a *kapara*, an atonement, as did



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the sacrifices in the Beit Hamikdash. Tisha B'Av by contrast is not a day of atonement, but a day of mourning. If the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash requires mourning, it is incumbent upon the Jewish people to recount on Tisha B'Av all the major catastrophes and disasters that have befallen them.<sup>2</sup>

Why do we read kinot? Kinot are a profound response to Jewish tragedy. In the modern era, it is difficult for many to lament the loss of a building that we never utilized, of a lifestyle that we never lived. The kinot are read to enable us feel the sadness, stir emotion in us and reflect on our past.<sup>3</sup> Reading about the galut, mothers eating their children and gedolim having their skin flayed, may help us focus on the tragedies of the day. Each kinah has its own unique message; *Eleh Ezkerah* focuses on individuals who died for the sake of the community at large.

I believe that there may be another motivation for including the martyrs in the service of Tisha B'Av. One of the Ten Martyrs was Rabbi Yishmael, Ishmael b. Elisha hakohen, a tannah who lived during the first and second centuries. He is known for his famous thirteen hermeneutical principles that many recite before *Pesukei D'Zimra* each morning.<sup>4</sup> Who was Rabbi Yishmael and why was he one of the

Ten Martyrs? Let us first examine his history.

The earliest story about Rabbi Yishmael is recounted in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Horayot* 3:4:

מעשה בי רבי יהושע שעלה לרומי אמרו על תינוק אחד ירושלמי שהיה אדמוני עם יפה עינים וטוב רואי וקצוותיו מסודרות לו תלתלים והוא עומד בקלון והלך רבי יהושע לבדוק כיון שהגיע לפתחו נענה ר' יהושע ואמר לו מי נתן למשימה יעקב וישראל לבודדים הלא ה' (ישעיהו מב:כד) נענה התינוק ואמר לו זו חטאנו לו ולא אבו בדרכיו הלך ולא שמעו בתורתו מיד זלגו עיניו דמעות ואמר מעיד אני עלי את השמים ואת הארץ שאיני זז מיד עד שאפדנו ופדאו בממון הרבה ושילחו לארץ ישראל וקרא עליו הפסוק הזה בני ציון היקרים וגו' (איכה ד:ה).

*An incident is told of Rabbi Yehoshua who went to Rome. There he was told about a child from Jerusalem with a ruddy complexion, beautiful eyes, a handsome face and curly locks of hair, who was imprisoned in a slave jail. Rabbi Yehoshua went to examine him. As he reached the entrance, he recited: "Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers? Surely the Lord?" (Isaiah 42:24). The child answered and said: "Against Him we have sinned, He in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey." (Isaiah 42:24). Thereupon Rabbi Yehoshua's eyes filled with tears, and he said: "I call heaven and earth as my witnesses that*

*I shall not budge from this spot until I have redeemed this child!" He redeemed him for a prodigious sum of money and sent him to the land of Israel. And concerning him, the Torah has said: "The precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold. How they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands." (Lamentations 4:2).*

The Talmud Bavli, *Gittin* 58a, has a more concise version of this story and specifically identifies the child as R. Yishmael. There are many details we learn about Rabbi Yishmael from this story. It is interesting to note that the Talmud describes in detail his beauty; his complexion and his hair stand out as unique. Not many sages have their looks described in detail in this way. He is in jail in Rome as a child, for what reason we are not told, although we can assume he was imprisoned because he was Jewish. We learn that from a young age, he was well educated, knowledgeable and had incredible insight into the Torah.

Rabbi Yishmael is a kohen, clearly coming from a prestigious family. According to the Gemara in *Baba Kamma* 80a, he was from the upper

Galilee (this does seem to contradict the Talmud in *Horayot*). However prestigious his family was as kohanim, he levels a harsh indictment against them for their actions.

אמר ר' ישמעאל: מבעלי בתים שבגליל העליון היו בית אבא, ומפני מה חרבו? שהיו מרעין בחורשין, ודנין דיני ממונות ביחיד, ואע"פ שהיו להם חורשים סמוך לבתיהם, שדה קטנה היתה ומעבירין דרך עליה.

*Rabbi Yishmael said: My father's house in Galil was destroyed because they used to graze small animals in forests and judge monetary cases alone (without a Beit Din of three). Even though they had forests near their houses, someone else owned a small field on the way to the forest.*

He blames their destruction on their violation of halakha. In *Baba Kamma* 81, the *Talmud* describes the institution of Yehoshua, who forbade the grazing of animals in the fields so that the land would instead be built and settled. But for the purposes of animal husbandry, the grazing was permitted. While Rabbi Yishmael's family observed this edict by taking their animals to graze in the forest, they earned Rabbi Yishmael's censure for infringing on the rights of their neighbors by passing through the small field on their way to the forest.<sup>5</sup>

In *Sanhendrin* 5a, the *Talmud* lists several cases in which a single individual would be permitted to rule on financial matters — if one were an expert, or if one received express permission from the exilarch. Rabbi Yishmael blames his family for adjudicating financial matters independently without judicial license. This is not a clear biblical prohibition, yet Rabbi Yishmael considers this to be one the reasons his family's home was destroyed.

Why does he judge his family so harshly? If they were in fact kohanim, they would be the leaders of their community. Leaders are held to a higher standard because they are supposed to set the example and be the moral guides for the nation. Rabbi Yishmael understood this and so recognized the leadership failings of his family. And yet, he himself did not succumb to their failures and survived. But his survival mandated time in jail.

Rabbi Yishmael had a deep affinity for logic and for grounding every concept and idea in the Written Torah. He believed that the Torah contains its own logical underpinnings, and thus we must study it using our powers of reasoning. If it were possible to reach a particular conclusion by means of human logic, then there would be no reason for the Torah to bother stating the law. He also was of the opinion that the Torah should be interpreted using everyday language and that Torah learning should be accessible to all.<sup>6</sup> He had a deep understanding of the Torah and a unique insight, which he wanted to make accessible to all those who wanted to learn Torah. Logic, insight and understanding are the traits attributed to him, and so his death is peculiarly painful. It is described in detail in *Eleh Ezkerah*:

מה מאד בָּקָה עָלָיו בְּחֶרֶדָה/בֵּת בְּלִיעַל לְקוֹל  
בְּקִיטוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעֵאל עֲמֵדָה/תֹּאֵר יִפְּיוּ בְּלִבָּה  
חֲמֵדָה/וְשִׁאֲלָה מֵאֵת אֲבִיהָ חִיטוֹ לְהַעֲמִידָה/  
נֶאֱמַר בְּלִיעַל דָּבָר זֶה לְעִשׂוֹתוֹ/לְהַפְשִׁיט עוֹרוֹ  
מֵעַל פָּנָיו שִׁאֲלָה מֵאֵתוֹ/וְלֹא עִבַּב דָּבָר זֶה  
לְעִשׂוֹתוֹ/וְכִשְׁהִגִּיעַ לְמָקוֹם תְּפִלִּין צָרַח בְּקוֹל מֵר  
לְיֹצֵר נִשְׁמָתוֹ.

*How very much he trembled as he wept!  
The daughter of the wicked one was  
silenced by the voice of Rabbi Yishmael's  
crying. She coveted his physical beauty  
and begged her father to let him live. The*

### R. Akiva's Insight

וכשנהרגו רבי שמעון ורבי ישמעאל,  
אמר להם רבי עקיבא לתלמידיו. התקינו  
עצמכם לפורענות, שאלו טובה עתידה  
לבא בדורנו, לא היו מקבלים אותה אלא  
רבי שמעון ורבי ישמעאל.

When R. Shimon and  
R. Yishmael were killed,  
R. Akiva said to his students,  
"Prepare yourselves for suffering,  
because if our generation was  
meant to have positive experiences,  
the beneficiaries would have been  
R. Shimon and R. Yishmael.  
**Mechilta to Shemot 22:22**

wicked one refused to grant her request!  
She then asked him to flay Rabbi  
Yishmael's face and he did not refrain  
from doing so. When the executioner  
reached the place of the tefillin, Rabbi  
Yishmael yelled out a bitter scream to his  
creator.

While his beauty did not impact him  
in life, it did play a significant role in  
his death. There is another individual  
in the Torah who was also known  
for his beauty: Yosef Hatzaddik. In  
Sefer Breishit, chapter 39 verse 6 it is  
written:

... ויהי יוסף יפה תואר ויפה מראה.  
... Behold Yosef was an attractive man.

Rabbi Yishmael was martyred  
because of the sale of Yosef  
Hatzaddik, and there seem to be  
many parallels between the two men.  
In fact according to kabbalah, Rabbi  
Yishmael is the reincarnation of

Yosef.<sup>7</sup> How can we understand this  
connection?

We must first examine the history of  
Yosef. When we first meet Yosef, we  
are told in *Parshat Vayeshav*, (37:2),  
that he is “*ro'eh et echav*” — a shepherd  
of his brothers, and he is “*na'ar et  
bnei Bilha v'et bnei Zilpah*” — a lad  
of his brothers. He shared with his  
brothers a common profession, but  
was separate from them as implied  
by the use of the word “*et*” in place of  
the classic word *im* — with. He spoke  
negatively about his brothers to his  
father and his brothers hate him, as we  
are told in verses that follow.

Why do they hate him so? The real  
reason is because he is beloved by his  
father who shows his favoritism for  
Yosef by bestowing upon him a special  
coat (37:3). Yosef didn't choose to  
be the beloved son, he didn't choose

to have the coat made for him, but  
Yosef also does nothing to improve  
the situation or to improve the  
relationship with his family.

The Torah proceeds to tell us about  
Yosef's dream. A dream he chooses  
to share with his brothers, practically  
begging them to hear the dream  
out — *shimu na hachalom hazeh*,  
please, listen to this dream (37:6).  
Many commentators say he shared  
this dream to show his brothers that  
he wanted to rule over them, but it  
is possible that this *na'ar*, this young  
child, just wanted some attention and  
wanted to know what his brothers  
think. If we look at the details, we see  
a boy desperate to have a closeness  
to his brothers. According to Rav  
Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Yosef was  
saying that in his dream, he and his  
brothers are not divided but united



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When we think of a tzaddik we often think of a perfect person. Why did Yosef warrant to be called tzaddik? Because he was not perfect — tzaddikim aren't born, they develop over time.

and work together. When he tried to bring his sheaf to join the group, it stood up by itself and then everyone's sheaves bowed down to his.<sup>8</sup>

Yosef may not have known what the dream meant, but the brothers immediately viewed this as a threat — their younger brother wanted to rule over them, to be their master. And his brothers hated him for that. Seeing their disdain for him, Yosef had a choice: would he try to bridge this growing gap with them or push them further apart? Yosef makes a choice and tells over his second dream to the brothers, again pushing the vision of him ruling over his family. This cemented his brothers' hatred and jealousy of him (37:8). While his father rebuked Yosef, his brothers go their own way by moving to Shechem, ironically the site of the last recorded dissension between the united brothers and Yaakov.

Yosef's choice to alienate his brothers and his failure to recognize their antipathy led to his brothers selling him into slavery, and eventually, taken to Egypt.<sup>9</sup> At this juncture, a change comes over Yosef after he is thrown in jail. There, he gains the trust of the chieftain and is placed in charge of two prominent prisoners: Pharaoh's prince of butlers, the *sar hamashkim*, and prince of bakers, *sar ha'ofim*. The Torah, often devoid of expressions of emotions, tells us of a conversation between Yosef and these two prisoners. Sensing one day that

they are troubled, Yosef asks: *madua p'neichem ra'im hayom* — why are you sad? (40:7) His ability to read the situation and appropriately respond to it is improving, as he is able to tease out their dreams.

What is interesting here is that despite Yosef's assistance, the butler forgets about Yosef's request to help him. Why? Because in the midst of interpreting the dreams, Yosef specifically asks the butler to save him and voices a complaint that he had been wrongfully imprisoned and was completely innocent. This complaint was ill timed and ill conceived, and, most important, reflective of his old tendency to be self-absorbed.

In the final act of Yosef's redemption, we see the last stage of his evolution and growth when Pharaoh summons him to interpret his dreams.<sup>10</sup> Here, we see a deeply intuitive, empathetic man emerge. The Torah painstakingly describes Yosef's preparation for this meeting — how he shaves, changes his clothes and heads out to Pharaoh (41:14). Rav Hirsch explains that the Torah goes into such detail to show us Yosef's understanding of what he was facing and what he needed to do in order to properly approach the situation.<sup>11</sup>

After interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Yosef tells him that he should appoint an *ish navon v'chacham* — an individual with deep knowledge and understanding (41:33). At the conclusion of his interpretation,

Pharaoh declares that there is no man with more *binah* or *chachma* than Yosef (41:39).

What are *binah* and *chachmah*? *Chachmah* is intelligence and knowledge. *Binah* is insight and intuition — the ability to assess a situation in its entirety and deduce the appropriate next steps. These are the traits that Yosef now embodies.

It is interesting to note that in Sefer Devarim, chapter 1, verse 13, when Moshe describes the traits of a judge, he says the two most important traits are *chachmah* and *bina*. What does a judge do? He ensures that there is *tzedek*, righteousness, among Am Yisrael. Only someone with *chachmah* and *binah* can truly be called a righteous person, a tzaddik. The Yosef we now know clearly embodies *chachmah* — this is the trait that enabled him to interpret dreams. As for *binah*, the ability to assess a situation and understand what was needed? It took him many trials and tribulations but he eventually achieved this state, which enabled him to save Mitzrayim and reconcile with his family.

This is the story of Yosef; the trials and tribulations that he had to encounter and endure in order to rise up and become Yosef the righteous.

While there are many differences between them, there are striking similarities between Yosef and Rabbi Yishmael. They both came from prominent families who had their challenges. They had to separate from their families to become the leaders they were destined to be. Both of them were beautiful, although this beauty impacted them in different ways. It was their time in jail that enabled their rise to prominence: Yosef because of his understanding of dreams

and Rabbi Yishmael because of his understanding of the Torah and its real-world applications. It is said that Rabbi Yishmael too had *chachmah* and *binah* and wanted to make the Torah accessible to all, and that is what motivated his interpretations of the Torah.<sup>12</sup> Both men also had a strong sense of justice. Yosef knew that his brothers had sinned by enabling him to be sold into slavery, and that the only way for them to really repent for their sin was to experience a similar situation and act differently. This was accomplished when they refused to let Yosef take Binyamin into custody (40:18). Rabbi Yishmael had the same sense of justice.<sup>13</sup>

Are the parallels mere coincidence? Or could it be that the kinah is reminding us of not just the story of Yosef, but of Yosef himself. When we think of a tzaddik we often think of a perfect person. Why did Yosef warrant to be called tzaddik? Because he was not perfect — tzaddikim aren't born, they develop over time.

The message to us, therefore, is that we can all strive to be tzaddikim — people who have insight and understanding of people, who develop over time as did Yosef Hatzaddik. This is perhaps why Rabbi Yishmael in particular is singled out as one of the Ten Martyrs, and why we say the kinah of *Eleh Ezkerah*. While the kinah is a source of sadness, perhaps it can also serve as a source of inspiration and hope. Each of the individuals who died had much to teach us about life, not only about death. As individuals we can strive to be tzaddikim like Yosef and make the world a better place through our deep love of and commitment to Torah, and our kindness to and understanding of those around us. And hopefully in that merit, we will herald the coming of the Mashiach and the building of the Beit Hamikdash and no longer sing the kinot out of sadness but only as a source of inspiration.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See Levine, Nachman “‘Eleh Ezkerah’: Re-reading the Asarah Harugei Malkhut,” available at <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol13Levine.pdf>.
- 2 Soloveitchik, Rabbi JB., e. Posner, S. *The Koren Mesorat Harav Kinot: The Lookstein edition*, OU Press, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem. p. 418 – 423.
- 3 *ibid*, p. xxx – xxxi.
- 4 Tosefta, *Sanhedrin* 7:5.
- 5 Lau, B. *The Sages: Character, Content & Creativity*. Maggid Books, Jerusalem. p.212, v.2
- 6 *ibid*, p.219.
- 7 R. Chaim Vital, *Sha'ar Hagilgulim* ch. 34. English translation available at [http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article\\_cdo/aid/1722984/jewish/Rabbi-Yishmael-the-High-Priest-345c.htm](http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/1722984/jewish/Rabbi-Yishmael-the-High-Priest-345c.htm).
- 8 Hirsch, R. S.R. *The Pentateuch*, Isaac Levy Publishing, England 1959. vol. 1 p. 542.
- 9 Breishit, chapters 37, 38.
- 10 Breishit 31:14.
- 11 Hirsch, R.S. *The Pentateuch*, Isaac Levy Publishing, England 1959. vol 1. p. 576
- 12 Lau, B.
- 13 *ibid*.

