

The Secret of the Seventy Year Exile

Rabbi Etan Moshe Berman

We typically view Meggilas Esther and the Purim story locally, as a compact story distinct from the general historical context in which it occurred. However, according to Chazal this is not the case.

What caused the first great threat of annihilation for the Jewish people? Why did God allow Haman to come to power and attempt the first holocaust. It cannot be that Haman had free will, and with it attempted to destroy the Jews. One has free will to kill oneself, but one's free will is unable to affect another person¹. These questions we can no longer answer with certainty, but one advantage of having prophets, and perhaps the most essential one, is that we can precisely answer these questions. And yet, Meggilas Esther does not tell us one word in this regard. For this reason, the students of the holy Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai asked this of their holy teacher:

The disciples of R. Shimon ben Yochai asked him, "For what were the [haters of] Israel in that generation decreed to be destroyed?" He answered, "You tell me." They said, "Because they enjoyed from the feast of that Rasha." "If so, only those of Shushan should be killed; those of the rest of the world should not be killed." They said to him, "You tell us." He said to them, "Because they bowed down to the image (in the days of Nevuchadnetzar - Rashi)." They said to him, "Is there favoritism in this thing (If so, how did they merit a miracle - Rashi)?" He said to them, "They only pretended (out of fear - Rashi), so too the Holy One Blessed Be He only pretended to do to them. And this is what is written (Lam. 3:33), 'He doth not afflict from His heart.'" (Meggilah 12a)

Here we find two causes, one that was apparently enough for the Jews of Shushan to be, at least threatened, with annihilation, namely, for partaking in the feast of Achashverosh; and another that was significant enough for all the Jews to be threatened with death, namely, that they pretended to bow to an image at the time of Nevuchadnetzar.

What exactly was Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai referring to? An episode that is recorded in the book of Daniel:

Daniel Chapter 3

1. King Nevuchadnetzar made an image of gold, its height sixty cubits, its width six cubits; he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the capital city of Babylon.
2. And Nevuchadnetzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the capital cities to come to the dedication of the image that King Nevuchadnetzar had set up.
3. Then, the satraps, the prefects, the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counselors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the capital cities were gathered to the dedication of the image that King Nevuchadnetzar had set up, and they were standing opposite the image that Nevuchadnetzar had set up.
4. And the announcement was issued aloud, "To you we are saying O peoples, nations and tongues.
5. At the time that you hear the sound of the whistling horn, the clavichord, the harp, the psaltery, the bagpipes, and all kinds of music, you shall fall and prostrate yourselves to the golden image that King Nevuchadnetzar has set up.

1. See, for example, **ספר החינוך מצוה רא"א**, regarding why it is forbidden to take revenge.

6. *And whoever will not fall and prostrate himself, will at that time be cast into a burning, fiery furnace."*
7. *In view of this, at that time, when all peoples heard the sound of the whistling horn, the clavichord, the harp, the psaltery, and all kinds of music, all peoples, nations, and tongues would prostrate themselves to the golden image that King Nevuchadnetzar had set up.*
8. *In view of this, at that time, some Chaldean men approached and denounced the Jews.*
9. *They spoke up and said to King Nevuchadnetzar, "May the king live forever!"*
10. *You, O king, gave an order that any person who hears the sound of the whistling horn, the clavichord, the harp, the psaltery, the bagpipes, and all kinds of music, shall fall and prostrate himself to the golden image.*
11. *And whoever does not fall and prostrate himself shall be cast into the fiery furnace.*
12. *There are Judahite men whom you appointed over the affairs of the capital cities of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah - see Rashi to Daniel 2:49); these men did not take counsel to follow your decree, O king. They do not worship your god and they do not prostrate themselves to the golden image that you have set up."*
13. *Then Nevuchadnetzar, in wrath and anger, ordered to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then these men were brought before the king.*
14. *Nevuchadnetzar spoke up and said to them, "Is it [my decree] meaningless, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, that you do not worship my god and that you do not prostrate yourselves to the golden image that I have set up?"*
15. *Now behold, you are destined, at the time that you hear the whistling horn, the clavichord, the harp, the psaltery, the bagpipes, and all kinds of music, to fall and prostrate yourselves to the image that I made, and if you do not prostrate yourselves, at that time you shall be cast into a burning, fiery furnace, and who is a god who will save you from my hand?*
16. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, "Nevuchadnetzar, we do not care to answer you about this matter.*
17. *Behold there is our God whom we worship; He can save us. From the burning, fiery furnace and from your hands, O king, He will save [us].*
18. *And if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not worship your god, neither will we prostrate ourselves to the golden image that you have set up."*
19. *Then Nevuchadnetzar was filled with wrath, and the features of his face changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; he shouted and ordered to heat the furnace seven times as much as it should be heated.*
20. *And he commanded certain mighty men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, to cast them into the burning, fiery furnace.*
21. *Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their trousers, their robes, and their [other] garments, and they were cast into the burning, fiery furnace.*
22. *In view of this, since the word of the king was urgent and the furnace was heated excessively, these men who had brought up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were killed by a spark of fire.*
23. *And these men, the three of them, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell into the burning, fiery furnace, bound.*
24. *Then King Nevuchadnetzar was bewildered and stood up in haste. He shouted and said to his leaders, "Did I not cast three men into the fiery furnace, bound?" They answered and said to the*

- king, "The king is true."
25. He called out and said, "Behold, I see four free men walking in the midst of the fire, and there is no wound upon them, and the form of the fourth one is like [that of] an angel."
 26. Then Nevuchadnetzar approached the gate of the burning, fiery furnace. He shouted and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the servants of the Most High God! Step out and come!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire.
 27. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the leaders of the king gathered [and] saw these men, that the fire had taken no effect on their bodies, the hair of their heads was not singed, their robes had not changed, and the smell of fire had not been absorbed by them.
 28. Nevuchadnetzar cried out and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, Who sent His angel and rescued His servants, who trusted Him, deviated from the command of the king, and risked their lives in order not to worship or prostrate themselves to any god except to their God.
 29. Now an order is issued by me that any people, nation, or tongue that will speak amiss about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and his house shall be made a dungheap because there is no other god who can save in this manner."
 30. Then the king made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego prosper in the capital city of Babylon.
 31. King Nevuchadnetzar, [said] to all peoples, nations, and tongues that dwell in the whole earth, "May your welfare increase!"
 32. The signs and wonders that the Most High God has done with me it behooves me to recite.
 33. How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and His dominion is with every generation."²

It would appear that the entire Jewish people bowed down to Nevuchadnetzar's image except for Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Why did they not bow down? Or, perhaps a more appropriate question is why did the rest of the Jewish people bow down? Either way we have a problem: if this image was an idol, then all the Jews should have given their lives rather than bow, and if it was not an idol, so then why were these three Tzaddikim willing to forfeit their lives for nothing?

The Talmud is bothered by this:

Come and hear: Furthermore extrapolated Thodos, the man of Rome: What justified Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to permit themselves to be thrown into the fiery furnace for the sanctification of G-d's name? They derived their justification from an a fortiori conclusion from the frogs. If in regards to the frogs, which are not obligated to sanctify the name of the Lord, it is written (Exodus 7), "And they will come [and ascend] in your homes [etc.] and in your ovens and in your dough." - When is dough found in an oven? We would say at a time when the oven is hot - we, that are commanded to sanctify the name, how much more so. (Pesachim 53b)

How does this answer our question? If bowing down to this image was an act of idolatry, then the source to forfeit their lives is from the verse of, "And you shall love the Lord God with all of your heart... and all of your soul (Deut. 6:5)", which teaches us that one must forfeit his life rather than do an act of idolatry, not an a fortiori conclusion from frogs! But perhaps the biggest question on the Gemara is how they can learn anything from frogs, who do not make

2. Translation from http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16486

choices! What in the world is going on?

The authors of the Tosafos begin to address some of our concerns:

Rashi explains the Talmud to be asking why didn't Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah learn from the verse, "and live by them" that one should transgress a prohibition to preserve his life. But this is difficult because it was in public, and we conclude in Sanhedrin 74a that everyone agrees that in public one is obligated to forfeit his life even to avoid violating an insignificant Mitzvah. Therefore, Rabbeinu Tam explains that the image produced for Nevuchadnetzar was not an idol, but rather a statue that he made to honor himself, and that is why the Talmud asks why did they not bow. This is also implied from the verse as it says, "They do not serve your god, and they do not bow to your golden image." It sounds like his god and the image were two separate things. According to this it also works out that which it says in Kesuvos 33b that had Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah been tortured, they would have served the image. If it had been an idol, they would not have, God forbid, bowed down to it. However, the language of "served" doesn't work out so well. (Tosafos Ibid.)

According to Rabbeinu Tam, you see that, in fact, this was not a case of idolatry at all. The question then, is not why the Jewish people as a whole bowed, but rather why didn't Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah bow? The Talmud is answering that they deduced their justification from the frogs. How can we make sense of this?

Suicide and assisted suicide is prohibited in Judaism. However, we do have a Mitzvah of sanctifying the name of God. This means that if one is killed due to his refusal to transgress a Divine command, he has sanctified the name of God. However, most of the time, God Himself has instructed us not to do so, as He would rather us live to do Mitzvos rather than die to avoid transgressing them. This is what the verse means when it says:

“וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוְהֶם אֶתְכֶם הָאֲדָמָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם כְּאֲדָמָה וְיִחַי בָּהֶם וְיִקְרָא יְיָ”

“And you shall guard my laws and my judgements that people will perform them and live by them, I am God. (Lev. 18:5)”

In three situations however, one is obligated to forfeit his life rather than transgress: Idolatry, murder and the forbidden sexual relationships. In addition, as Tosafos pointed out, in a public forum one is obligated to forfeit his life to avoid transgressing any Mitzvah. In the situation of the image produced for Nevuchadnetzar, there was no transgression at all to bow in honor of the King. In such a situation, is one allowed to forfeit his life? It would seem to be absurd and in effect no different than suicide! Yet, Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah deduced a justification from the frogs. Frogs have no Mitzvos, and yet there were frogs that gave their lives to create a sanctification of God's name – how so? Because the warning to Pharaoh was that there will be frogs even in his ovens, even when they are on. So to fulfill this plague, certain frogs needed to jump into the ovens. The result was a sanctification of God's name, because it created the proper plague. If we are told this about the frogs, it must be that it teaches us something. Therefore, they deduced from the frogs that one is permitted to create a sanctification of God's name, even when there is no obligation, and even when one is not thereby avoiding a transgression. This was the deduction from the frogs.

But this does not explain why they would risk death! When it came to the frogs we understand the resulting sanctification, in that it created the proper plague, but what were Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah trying to accomplish? What were they trying to teach the Jewish people? Remember, Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai said that bowing down to this statue was the reason for the threat of annihilation against the Jews at the time of Purim. Yet, based on what we have

seen, there was no reason to refrain! So, if we can explain the rationale of Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah, we should be able to understand the condemnation of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Interestingly enough, we find that Mordechai did exactly the same thing as Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah. How so?

The direct cause of the decree of Haman, explicitly stated in Meggilas Esther³ is Mordechai's refusal to bow down to Haman. It was beneath Haman's dignity to bare a grudge against one person, so instead of killing Mordechai, Haman decided to kill his entire nation. According to the Vilna Gaon⁴, this is why the verse tells us that Mordechai let out a great, bitter cry. Great, because of the great tragedy, and bitter, because it was his fault. So why didn't he bow?

Chazal tell us⁵, that Haman made himself into a deity. He considered himself a god. Now, no one believed this ludicrous claim, but for this reason, he wanted all to bow down to him. What is the Halachah in such a situation? Tosafos Sanhedrin 61b tell us that there is no prohibition to bow down, as Rava says there in the Talmud, if one bows down to an idol that no one believes in, and everyone only serves it out of fear of punishment – such an act is not idolatry. For this reason, the Jewish people bowed to Haman, just as they bowed to the statue of Nevuchadnetzar so many years before. But Mordechai would not bow. He figured, let them throw me into a fiery furnace. It never occurred to him that the entire Jewish people would be threatened with annihilation because he alone refused to bow. We have the same question on Mordechai as we did on Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah! Why did they not bow down? What is the sanctification of God's name that they were trying to accomplish?

One more question, and with this we begin our answer:

After the tables are turned on Haman, and the Jews are able to reverse his decree, the Meggilah tells us:

”לְיְהוָה יָסַף הַיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן וְיָקָר (אִסְתֵּר ח:טז).”
“For the Jews there was light, happiness, joy and splendor (Esther 8:16).

Chazal tell us that:

תורה refers to אורה,
שבת ויום טוב refers to שמחה,
מילה refers to ששון
and תפילין refers to יקר.

So, in effect, the verse is telling us that the Jews had Torah, Holidays, Bris Milah and Tefillin. If for some reason we need to know this, then just write it! Why did the Meggilah have to couch these Mitzvos in other terms? Besides, were they not doing these Mitzvos before? We have no indication that this was the case. What are Chazal trying to tell us?

The Jews never stopped performing these Mitzvos. However, after the miraculous turnaround of Purim, the Jews had a completely different attitude towards these Mitzvos, and this new attitude, I think, is a reflection of the

3. See Esther chapter 3.

4. ב'אור הגר"א צ"צ הפשט ד:א.

5. מ'ילה :.

rectification of their sin, which was the actual cause of the threat of annihilation.

When one does something purely out of obligation, more often than not, it lacks excitement. In such a situation, Torah is Torah, but not אור, not light. You can keep all the laws of Shabbos and the Holidays, but it will not be שמחה. Bris Milah is an act that a baby is not intellectually conscious of, and the resulting covenant is not necessarily אהבה. When one wraps תפילין at 6:30am after struggling to get out his warm bed on a dark, cold winter morning, it more often than not fails to be splendor. However, it all depends on one's attitude.

The story is told that the Shaagas Aryeh hired a Jewish wagon driver to transport him back home. When they arrived at a crossroads, the driver turned to the road that would take them significantly out of the way. When asked why he was proceeding in that way, he responded that to go straight would result in their entering a city where the non-Jews attack Jewish wagons and it was dangerous. The Shaagas Aryeh, so desiring to be back in his Bais Midrash, requested that they go that way nonetheless. After consistent refusal by the driver, the Shaagas Aryeh insisted and promised that they would not be harmed. With the promise of the Tzaddik, the driver acquiesced. When they entered the city, the townspeople began to line the streets to pelt the wagon, but instead they froze and gazed at the holy Tzaddik, unable to even lift a hand. The wagon driver was amazed. "How did you do that?" he asked of the Shaagas Aryeh. "It was no trick," he explained, "The verse says that all the nations of the world will see that the name of God is called upon you and they will fear you. The Talmud teaches us that the 'name of God' referred to is the תפילין שבראש." With this explanation the wagon driver was overjoyed. He did not wear his Tefilin all day, as the Shaagas Aryeh did, but now he would don them every time he was about to enter this town! This new weapon would save him hours and hours of travel time. On his return trip, the driver slapped on his Tefilin prior to entering the city. However, it was of no avail, he was pelted worse than ever before, and was lucky to escape with his life. Depressed, bruised and confused, he awaited his next encounter with the Shaagas Aryeh to understand what went wrong. At their next meeting, the Tzaddik explained, "The Talmud tells us that the 'name of God' refers to תפילין שבראש, not to תפילין שצדק."

Tefilin, and any other Mitzvah for that matter, can be something that sits atop our head, an almost meaningless robotic act of "service" to God. Tefilin that are IN your head however, are a completely different story. To merge our mind with that which is inscribed within our Tefilin is the ideal.

Shabbos 88a relates that when God gave the Torah to the Jewish people, he held a mountain over their heads and threatened them, "If you accept the Torah, gevaldik. If not, this will be your cemetery." From here we see that the Torah was forced upon us. We follow it because we have to. However, the Talmud continues that the Jewish people later accepted it willingly in the days of Achashverosh. There was a new acceptance of the Torah at the time of Purim. It became something they wanted to fulfill. The Vilna Gaon gives us an analogy to appreciate this.

There was a Prince who did something terrible, and was exiled by his father, the King. In truth, the King still loved his son and wanted him to mend his ways and return to the palace. Exile, however, was the only way to get the message across that the prince's actions were unacceptable. Fearing for the prince's safety from animals and jealous ministers, the King wanted to send his guards to protect him. However, if the prince discovered that the King was constantly protecting him, it would undermine the entire lesson. The King decided that he would indeed provide protection for his son, in the form of hidden bodyguards. Their instructions were to protect the prince from all harm, but under

no condition reveal themselves. One day, as the prince was wandering in the forest, a rabid bear began to chase after the prince. Out of nowhere, a tree branch fell onto the head of the bear, knocking it unconscious. Another day, a venomous snake attempting to bite the prince is smashed by a rock. Incidents of the like continued until finally the prince was convinced that these are not coincidences. The King must have sent his men to protect him. The prince was overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude and love for his father, that even in exile, the King truly loved him and was constantly aware of his activities and overseeing his protection. The prince decided immediately that he would mend his ways and return to his father.

It was from this perspective that the Jews of the world accepted the Torah out of love. Even after the destruction of the Temple, even after the exile of the nation, in Persia and Media like a lonely sheep in a pack of wolves, God was constantly on guard, seeing to it that the Jews would have an Esther, one of the King's hidden bodyguards.

With an immediate sense of gratitude and love, itself an expression of choice, the Jewish people wanted to serve God. The result was light, happiness, joy and splendor. Judaism was no longer kept down deep in the recesses of the heart, it became a shining light, expressed with outward verve and enthusiasm.

The decree of Haman was announced on the 13th of Nissan. The following three days were ones of fasting and prayer. On the 17th of Nissan, Haman was hanged. However, the decree had not been annulled. Strangely enough, Mordechai and Ester waited until the 23rd of Sivan to request the decree be annulled. Perhaps they waited so long out of fear that Achashverosh would feel taken advantage of and deny their request. The Vilna Gaon however, says something much deeper, and within it lies, I think, the secret of that exile.

Mordechai and Ester waited until the 23rd of Sivan to request the annulment of the decree because it was 70 days from the original decree. Long before, the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that there would be a 70 year exile⁶. These 70 days corresponded to those 70 years of exile, one day for each of the 70 years. This was the end of the exile; the 70 years were up. In fact, it was not until three years later that Darius II, the son of Esther and Achashverosh, formally ordered the rebuilding of the Temple. Nonetheless, because of this change in attitude, the exile of 70 years was over.

What's the significance of 70? Chazal tell us, "Wine goes in, secret comes out." In Hebrew, the numerical value of wine is 70, and so too, the numerical value of secret. Psychologically, the idea is that after imbibing enough wine, one loses his inhibition; the internal but inhibited, finds external expression. Perhaps this was the definition and parameter of the 70 year exile. From the beginning, they were internally committed, but not on fire. There was no light, no אור. Was it permitted for the Jewish people to bow to the statue of Nevuchadnetzar? Yes. Would one bow if he were on fire? No. Who was Nevuchadnetzar? Perhaps the biggest desecration of God's name in history. This is the man that destroyed the first Temple. He made God look vulnerable, נפול ונח. How could one bow to that? The bowing itself only furthers the desecration of God's name. Technically, there is nothing wrong with it. Yet, one who is on fire with his love for God, would never dream of such an act. The one who would bow is one who sees the Torah as rules that he must follow, and this bowing as a permitted act. Such a person stood at Sinai, accepted the Torah under duress and fulfills it because he must. Such a person has a Bris Milah, he has a covenant with God, but it is not one that entails the joy of a connection with the Divine. He observes the Holidays as a rule, but fails to see the happiness of his role in bringing the Moshiach and ultimate perfection of the world. He keeps the laws of Shabbos, but fails to experience

6. Jeremiah 29:10

gratitude for his constant existence. He slaps on phylacteries, but they are not a crown of splendor atop his head, an extension of his emotional and intellectual union with the Almighty.

Once the Jewish people took empty external actions and made them external expressions of an internal love, the 70 year exile was over. Perhaps that is what the 70 year exile was, and that is what their failure was from the outset. This was the message of Chaniah, Mishael and Azariah already at the beginning of the exile. Mordechai did the same. Yet, it took the decree of Haman to get the Jews to appreciate what the prophets had been telling them for generations. God does not want sacrifices, nor any empty external action; He wants your heart.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai tells us that the Jews pretended to bow down so God pretended to destroy them. Measure for measure. This was the true cause of the threat of Haman's decree. What saved them? They stopped pretending.

”לְיִהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן וְיָקָר (אסתר ח:16).”

“For the Jews there was light, happiness, joy and splendor (Esther 8:16).”