



The Chosen Interpretation

By Tzvi Dock ('23)

In Parashat Mikeitz, we read about Paroh's cryptic dreams, whose explanations are unknown to his royal advisors and can only be interpreted by Yosef HaTzaddik. Rashi (BeReishit 41:8, s.v. וַיִּזְכֹּר אֹתָם לַפְּרֵעָה) explains that Paroh's advisors gave him interpretations, but they did not satisfy him. It was not until Yosef HaTzaddik interpreted the dreams to mean seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine that Paroh was content. So, why did Paroh find Yosef's interpretations more satisfying?

One answer is that the focus of the dreams was about cows and wheat, so logically it would make sense that the dream would be related to the agriculture of the land in Egypt. If so, how can it be that Paroh's royal advisors failed to notice this obvious motif? Rav Mordechai Sabato suggests that the difference between Yosef HaTzaddik's interpretation and that of the royal advisors relates to the theological approaches of monotheism and paganism.

Yosef HaTzaddik understood the dreams as a warning from Hashem of an inevitable impending crisis to help avoid or adequately prepare for the disaster. For the advisors, the notion of a divine plan was ludicrous. Why? The idea of many existing deities directly correlates to the concept of limitation of the power of each deity, meaning each power must keep its respective plan a secret to ensure no other forces will interfere. Hence, why would one of the powers reveal their plan to Paroh with the possibility that he could interfere? On the other hand, monotheism accepts Hashem as having unlimited power. Hashem jeopardizes nothing by revealing His plans to man. On the contrary, Hashem deliberately seeks to assist man. So only Yosef HaTzaddik, understanding monotheism, successfully interpreted Paroh's dreams to

what was satisfactory. We should be mindful that since Hashem has unlimited power and does not lose anything from helping us when He sends us a message, it is for our benefit.

Why Can't I Benefit from the Chanukah Lights

By David Kritchevski ('26)

On Chanukah, we are not allowed to benefit from the light of the Menorah. We are not allowed to use it as a reading lamp or use it to light other candles. At first, this seems purposeless; however, we can learn an important lesson from this.

Greek culture often focused on usefulness and practicality. They didn't care about the spiritual meaning of life, and they wanted everything to be physically pleasurable. Unlike the Greeks, we focus on spirituality, not physicality. We often do Mitzvot that seem to have no purpose, but in reality, they have a spiritual meaning behind them. The Issur of not benefiting from the Chanukah lights is one of them. By not benefiting from the Chanukah lights, we are showing the world and Hashem that we are lighting only to remember the miracle and not for physical pleasure or beauty. We are showing the world that we care more about Avodat Hashem than physical pleasure.

Next time you fulfill a Mitzvah, keep in mind that you're doing it for the sake of Hashem and not for physical pleasure. If you can choose between learning Torah and going to the stadium or watching TV, learn Torah. May all our actions be LeSheim Shamayim and not for the sake of physical pleasure.

Nevezadran the Convert!?

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

In an astonishing turn of events, after the Babylonian top general Nevuzadran murdered massive numbers of Jews in the wake of Churban Bayit Rishon, he converted to Judaism (Gittin 57b). The Gemara even refers to him as a Ger Tzedek, a righteous convert¹. This situation seems to be the equivalent of Adolf Eichmann, Yimach Shemo, converting to Judaism after committing his heinous actions. How are we to grasp the meaning of this astounding development?

The Gemara relates: “With regard to the Babylonian exile following the destruction of the First Beit HaMikdash, Rabbi Chiyya bar Avin says that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha says: An old man from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem related to me: In this valley that lies before you, Nevuzaradan, captain of the guard of the Babylonian king Nevuchadnezzar, killed 2,110,000 people. And in Jerusalem itself he killed almost 1 million people on one stone until the blood of his victims flowed and touched the blood of Zechariah to fulfill “וְדָמִים בְּדָמִים” (הושע 4:2), “And blood touches blood” (4:2).”

The Gemara clarifies the details of what happened: Nevuzaradan found the blood of Zechariah², the son of Jehoiada the Kohein, 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,

¹ Rambam (Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah 14:1) refers to a Ger Tzedek as a proper convert of the highest order. Describing Nevuzadran as a Ger Tzedek implies that had did not violently coerce the rabbis to accept him as a convert.

² It is important to clarify that this prophet-Kohen is not the Zechariah, who was a prophet during the early Second Temple period who authored Sefer Zechariah, part of the Trei Asar section of Tanach. Instead, our story speaks about the Navi-Kohen Zecharia who rebuked the First Temple period Melech Yo'ash for turning to Avodah Zara later in life. Yoash's men murdered Zechariah in the Beit HaMikdash for rebuking Yo'ash. In his dying words, Zechariah said “Hashem will see and exact justice.” The Tanach does not record an act of justice and Gittin 57b fills in the missing story of Hashem's justice for the murder of Zechariah. It is shocking that the righteous kings that followed Yo'ash, such as Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu, did not do Teshuva for their ancestor Yo'ash's heinous crime. Had these righteous kings done Teshuvaj for Zechariah's terrible murder, perhaps we would have been spared Nevuzadran's murderous rampage.

compared it to the blood bubbling up from the ground, and saw that they were not similar.

Nevuzaradan told 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 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 (22-24:20 - דַּבְּרֵי הַיָּמִים ב'), and for many years now, his blood has not settled.

Nevuzaradan said to them: I will appease Zechariah. He brought the Great Sanhedrin members and 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 brought schoolchildren and killed them alongside it, but it still did not settle. Finally, Nevuzaradan 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, Nevuzaradan contemplated the idea of Teshuvah and 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 be 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 Beraita relating to this matter: Na'aman, commander of the army of the king of Aram (see מלכים ב', chapter 5), was not a 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. Nevuzaradan, by contrast, was a convert, as explained previously.

The Gemara adds that some of Haman's descendants studied Torah in Bnei Brak³, and some of Sisera's descendants taught children Torah in Jerusalem, and some of Sennacherib's descendants taught Torah in

³ Binyamin Jachter suggests that this refers to Rabi Akiva who lived in Bnei Brak (Sanhedrin 32b). Bnei Brak in the time of the Mishna and Gemara was not the bastion of Torah as it is today. Sanhedrin 32b indicates that Rabi Akiva is the sole major authority who lived in Bnei Brak. Thus, if one vocalizes the Gemara as Limdu Torah (meaning taught Torah) and not Lamdu Torah (studies Torah, as Sefaria translates) then it might well refer to Rabi Akiva. The Gemara might not state this point explicitly to be gentle regarding Rabi Akiva's ancestry.

public. Who are they? They are Shemaya and Avtalyon, the teachers of Hillel HaZakein⁴.

Defining Horrific Crimes as Righteous

Most people wish to feel good about themselves and their actions. Sadly, humans have a significant capacity for rationalization, often in bizarre manners. Thus, it is not uncommon for people to bizarrely define a horrible action as righteous. Zecharia's unrelenting boiling blood offered the bloodthirsty Nevuzadran the opportunity to feel justified in murdering Jews en masse.

Nevuzadran's Conversion

After Zecharia's blood finally settled, Nevuchadnetzar was struck by his visceral encounter with divine justice. He realized that he, too, would be held accountable for his extreme actions. It is reasonable to assume that Nevuzadran envisioned the sort of retribution that awaited him, the likes of which the Gemara (Gittin 56a) describes Titus⁵ enduring.

To the great credit of Nevuzadran, he did not conveniently ignore the sobering reality he encountered. His willingness to forego his position of extraordinary power as lead general to Nevuchadnetzar, the world's most powerful person, is remarkable. He was willing to sever ties to his family and his fortune. He encountered truth and made a lifetime commitment to live in full accordance with it, no matter the sacrifices.

Tanach vs. Gemara

The Talmud in Gittin 55b - 58a presents stories from Churban Bayit Sheini. There is no need to give accounts from Churban Bayit Rishon since the scenes from that time are depicted in the Tanach by Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel, and even Tehillim⁶. The story of Nevuzadran avenging the blood of Zecharia and his subsequent conversion is the only incident from Bayit Rishon presented in this Sugya (Talmudic section).

Why is this story not recorded in Tanach? We suggest that the Tanach avoids violation of Ona'at Devarim (verbal abuse) by reminding a convert of his less-than-stellar past (Bava Metzia 58b). While the Gemara tells the story, inclusion in Tanach would have spread the word far more than its mention in the Talmud.

⁴ It seems that a grand nephew of Hitler converted and lives as in Orthodox Jew in Jerusalem <https://aish.com/48906667/>.

⁵ Titus is the Second Temple counterpart to Nevuzadran, as he was the lead Roman general in the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of Bayit Sheini.

⁶ See, for example, Mizmorim 79 and 137.

Three Lessons

Why, then, do Chazal include the Nevuzadran story in the Gemara? Chazal do so because of the crucial lessons that emerge.

First, the story teaches that we must accept a worthy candidate for conversion despite a terrible past. We are forbidden to withhold access to our people to someone who is committed to Hashem, Torah U'Mitzvot, and Am Yisrael. I heard Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik declare that genuine non-Jews enjoy a right to convert⁷. Nevuzadran is an extreme case that starkly illustrates this principle⁸.

Second, the Nevuzadran story is presented after the Gemara describes the massive casualties we suffered in the fall of Beitar. The Nevuzadran incident shows that large-scale Jewish losses are not limited to the Churban Bayit Sheini period and its aftermath. Instead, it is very sadly an ongoing theme in Jewish life, as was most horrifically expressed during the Shoah.

Megillah 16a describes the Jewish people as a people of extremes. When we rise, we ascend as tall as the stars, but when we fall, we descend as low as dust. The Chizkuni understands Devarim 4:25-35 as teaching that no nation has suffered as much as the Jews. Amos 3:2 teaches that since Hashem has developed a unique relationship with us, we are punished more severely than any other nation if we betray Hashem and our responsibilities to Him. Very sadly, these teachings are not a matter of theoretical discussion. Our people have lived this reality for millennia.

A third lesson is expressed by what Jews said as they were being led to the Nazi gas chambers (as reported by Rav Avraham Pam), Mir Veln Zey Ibberleben, we shall outlive them. Our Gemara concludes the Nevuzadran story with a postscript listing the many villains who sought to destroy us and had descendants

⁷ We develop and support Rav Soloveitchik's assertion at <https://www.koltorah.org/halachah/a-right-to-convert-developing-an-idea-of-rav-soloveitchik-part-one-by-rabbi-chaim-jachter>. Interestingly, Rav Wosner in Teshuvot Shevt HaLevi 5:149 permits converting proper Germans Geirut candidates despite the terrible atrocities committed by their people during the Second World War.

⁸ For further discussion, see Rav Asher Weiss, Teshuvot Minchat Asher 1:49. Rav Weiss, though, suggest that it is permissible to deny conversion to a serious candidate if there is concern that our doing the conversion would harm our people.

who became great Torah teachers. Despite staggering losses, the fire of the eternal people continues to burn brightly, with the descendants of our worst oppressors leading the Torah charge. Nevuzadran exemplifies this phenomenon with his stunning shift from a great oppressor to a devoted Jew. Nevuzadran's dramatic transformation expresses our people's lasting and indomitable spiritual energy and power.

Conclusion

Shemot 1:12 teaches that the more they harmed us, the greater we became. After he recognizes that the truth resides with the militarily powerless, the conversion of one of our greatest oppressors provides us with added resilience and grit to withstand whatever challenges we face throughout the generations. As much as Nevuzadran opposed and harmed us, his conversion strengthened us even more.

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