



A moment of religious crisis, or of bureaucratic management? The Heliodorus Stele (left), recording the appointment of Olympiodorus as regional “overseer of the sanctuaries”, and Raphael’s *The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple* (right), depicting Heliodorus (possibly the same man) attacked by divine forces (as told in 2 Maccabees 3).

When they conquered Jerusalem, the Seleucid kings allowed the Jews to be governed under their own laws (i.e. the laws of the Torah). However, in the years preceding the Maccabean Revolt, some Jerusalemites had petitioned to form a Greek city (*polis*), Antiocheia, which existed inside and alongside the Jewish city of Jerusalem. After the events of 168 BCE (probably rebellion or unrest—we have no direct sources on this), the Jewish community lost its local rights, including control of the Temple and the ability to administer itself under their own laws. The Temple was handed over to Antiocheia. This Greek city now also ruled over the Jews, who lost their corporate status and become serfs of the city. The new city also mandated a series of cultic gestures, including participation in civic festivals and a ruler-cult that worshipped Antiochus.

These acts were fairly typical Greek civic practices in the Seleucid world. However, the Jews who lived in Antiocheia-Jerusalem experienced them as persecution and, as a consequence, rebelled. This historical context of Hanukkah reveals the Seleucid perspective on the Maccabean rebellion, and might make us cautious about accepting simplistic narratives of persecution and agency.

Hanukkah | Miketz 5777

חנוכה | מקץ תשע"ז



The Unpardonable Sin

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Among baseball aficionados, the name of Ralph Branca is universally known. Branca, who died at the age of 90 at the end of November, was famous (or, for many, infamous) for being the pitcher who gave up the “Shot Heard Round the World.” In the final game of the 1951 National League championship, the Brooklyn Dodgers were leading 4-2 in the bottom of the 9th inning with two men on base when the New York Giants’ power hitter, Bobby Thomson, came to the plate to bat. The Dodgers called on Branca to save the game, but his second pitch flew off of Thomson’s bat and over the green wall in left center field for a home run. As Thomson sailed around the bases, the Giants’ announcer—in perhaps the most famous moment in sports broadcasting history—shouted, “The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!”

Prior to that fateful pitch—memorialized in the writings of John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac, and Don DeLillo—Branca was an accomplished baseball player. He had three consecutive All-Star seasons for the Dodgers. And he deliberately stood beside Jackie Robinson on opening day in 1947 when his teammate broke baseball’s color barrier. After 1951, he never regained his baseball stride, and Dodgers’ fans never forgave him. Decades later, Branca made this poignant comment: “**A guy commits murder and he gets pardoned after 20 years. I didn’t get pardoned.**”

In this week’s Torah portion, Miketz, we also are confronted with the notion of an unpardonable sin. We are deep into the story of Joseph, and famine has struck in Canaan. Jacob sends his ten remaining sons—all except the youngest and favorite son, Benjamin—to Egypt where food rations are available. They meet with their brother Joseph, who is now second in power only to Pharaoh, but they do not recognize him. Joseph, however, knows who they are and yet does not reveal himself. Instead, he accuses them of spying and orders them to retrieve Benjamin from Jacob’s house and return with him to Egypt. In order to insure that they do so, Joseph seizes Simeon as a hostage.

Jacob, who believes that Joseph is dead and now hears that Simeon has been taken prisoner, is understandably reluctant to risk the loss of his most beloved son, Benjamin. Reuven, the oldest son, desperately tries to convince him to let Benjamin return to Egypt with him and his brothers. “Then Reuven said to his father, **‘You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you’**” (Gen. 42:37). To modern ears this seems a tad harsh, but in biblical terms, offering up one’s child as a pledge of faith or security is not unheard of. Abraham is willing to offer up Isaac in Genesis chapter 22; and in the book of Judges, Jephthah kills his only daughter after pledging to sacrifice “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return” (Judges 11:30-31, 39). All of this may serve as a polemic against child sacrifice, but there is no mistaking the powerful force of such a pledge.

To his credit, Jacob dismisses Reuven’s argument out of hand: “My son [Benjamin] must not go down with you for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief” (Gen. 42:38). Other than his affection for Benjamin, we do not know why Jacob rejects Reuven’s guarantee. Perhaps he concluded that having lost one son already (Joseph) and facing the possible loss of a second son (Benjamin), not to mention the danger of losing a third son held hostage (Simeon), it would be scant comfort if Reuven had to redeem his pledge and sacrifice two of Jacob’s grandsons. Jacob might have been our most flawed patriarch (which is what makes him so interesting), but his devotion to his family permeates the Genesis narrative.

Reuven’s younger brother, Judah, tries a different tack entirely to convince Jacob. If he fails in his mission to return Benjamin safely to his father, Judah does not offer to sacrifice anyone or anything. Instead, he tells Jacob: “I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, **I shall stand guilty before you forever**” (Gen. 43:9). In other words, Judah is willing to acknowledge that if he fails to safeguard Benjamin, his sin will never be pardoned. That is the guarantee that Jacob accepts.

How are we to understand the intent behind Judah’s words “I shall stand guilty before you forever”? The 19th century Italian rabbi and scholar Elijah Benamozegh offers the following explanation in his Torah commentary *Em Lamikra*:

The figure of speech contains a valuable lesson, teaching us something not otherwise explicitly alluded to in the Torah: that there is no punishment outside of the sin. Sin itself is its

own punishment in the Divine scheme of judgment and serves the purpose of reward and punishment.

Judaism is a religion that holds the promise of forgiveness. That is the theme of the Book of Jonah and the meaning of the High Holidays. We can seek forgiveness from God and our fellow human beings and, in so doing, our burdens will be lifted. But, in the nature of things, expiation is incomplete. There are some misdeeds, some angry words, some failures to take a stand that are never forgiven because we cannot forgive ourselves. The sin is its own punishment. In Tim O’Brien’s searing phrase, these are “the things we carry.”

While many would argue that carrying around these unpardonable sins throughout our lives is unhealthy, I would suggest otherwise. To be sure, we should be generally forgiving of ourselves just as we should be forgiving of others. But knowing that there are certain misdeeds and failures—a limited number of acts and omissions—that we will carry as a burden throughout our lives regardless of whether God or others forgive us creates a powerful incentive to avoid them if at all possible. Knowing that we “shall stand guilty forever” in our own eyes compels us to act with compassion when we are tempted to remain bystanders, to vigilantly watch our words so as not to humiliate others, and to risk our own safety to protect our neighbors.

Ralph Branca made one bad pitch and lived with the consequences for this rest of his life. As much as we wish otherwise, some things we do in life cannot be called back. That knowledge helps us to live with greater urgency, with greater sensitivity, and with greater compassion.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Why Did the Seleucid State “Persecute” the Jews?

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The familiar version of the story of Hanukkah is one of Jewish agency. Jews were persecuted and then, under the Hasmonean banner, successfully defeated the Seleucid conquerors, drove off the persecutors, and rededicated their Temple. But this telling omits why the Seleucids “persecuted” the Jews. This is an aspect of Hanukkah that’s poorly understood, but recent scholarship helps to explain the Seleucid perspective.