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Making Way for the Bride

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman ☪
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Shoftim

Making Way for the Bride

It wasn't that long ago that *Time* magazine ran a cover story of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, with the headline, "King Bibi."

Such words don't rub a lot of Jews well.

As a general rule, the Jewish Nation doesn't have positive memories of kings—starting with King Saul and all the way through Bar Kochva, the history of Jewish kings is not particularly positive.

But as is the case with every general rule, there's always an exception.

So allow me to tell you the story of a Jewish king who ruled just about exactly 2,000 years ago in the Holy Land. His name was King Agrifas. As it turns out, Agrifas was the grandson of a far more famous king: Herod.

King Herod is known to historians today as one of the greatest builders of ancient times. Only recently they discovered his palace in the Shomron region of Israel, and they're amazed by the scope of the structure. Even the Beis Hamikdash, which he rebuilt, is described by the Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 51b) with the words, "He who did not see Herod's building did not see a beautiful building in his life."

But to the Jewish Nation, Herod is remembered as an evil and cruel king who murdered his own wife and children, not to mention many Jews who tried to oppose him.

However, his grandson Agrifas is actually remembered for good things. The Sages only have good things to say about him.

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 3:5) tells us that "King Agrifas once asked if he could bring 1,000 burnt offerings on one day. He sent a message to the High Priest saying, 'Let no man bring offerings today but me.' "

Perhaps it was his first day as king or something like that. Regardless, he decided that on that day, the the altar was reserved for him. "Along came one poor man with two pigeons in his hand, and he said to the Kohein Gadol, 'Sacrifice these.' The Kohein Gadol said to him, 'The king has commanded me, "Let no man bring offerings today but me." ' He said to him, 'My master the Kohein Gadol! I catch four pigeons every day. I sacrifice two and I make my livelihood from two. If you don't let me sacrifice them, you're depriving me of my livelihood.' So the Kohein Gadol took them and sacrificed them."

That night, the Midrash continues, "Agrifas was shown in a dream that the poor man's sacrifice came before him"—he was shown by Heaven that the sacrifice of that poor man who brought two little pigeons was more important in G-d's Eyes than the 1,000 burnt offerings that Agrifas brought.

The Midrash continues: "He sent for the Kohein Gadol and said to him, 'Did I not tell you that no man is to bring offerings today but me?'" So the Kohein Gadol told him the situation exactly as it had happened: "My master the king! A poor man came with two pigeons in hand and he said to me, 'Sacrifice these for me.' I said to him, 'The king commanded me that no man is to bring offerings today but me.' He said to me, 'I catch four pigeons every day. I sacrifice two and I make my livelihood from two. If you don't let me sacrifice them, you're depriving me of my livelihood.'"

So the king said to him, "Everything you did was right."

Any normal king who discovered that the High Priest violated an explicit order would have severely punished him. But King Agrifas acted with humility and even praised the Kohein Gadol for overriding his order.

In the Torah, there is a mitzvah called "Hakhel." In the Temple Era, the entire Jewish Nation—men, women and children—would assemble in Jerusalem once every seven years. The king would stand on a special wooden platform and recite the Book of Devarim in front of everyone. The purpose of the event was to relive the Stand at Mt. Sinai, when the entire Jewish Nation stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and received the Torah. And so, once every seven years, the Jewish Nation would engage in a sort of "instant replay" of the Giving of the Torah, in which the king would read the entire Deuteronomy and the Nation would reinvigorate its obligation and its dedication to keep the Torah and mitzvos.

The custom was that the entire Nation would stand during this event, just like they did at Mt. Sinai, while only the king would sit and read from the Torah scroll in a seated position.

And the Mishnah (Tractate Sotah) tells us that King Agrifas, however, chose to recite the Torah while standing. Even though he was allowed to sit, he behaved humbly and recited the entire Book of Devarim standing. "And the Sages praised him," the Mishnah says—the Sages loved his humility. So here again we see the humility of Agrifas.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read about the mitzvah of *minui melech*, of appointing a king. Now, who is fit to be a King of Israel? The Torah says: "From the midst of your brothers you shall set upon yourselves a king; you cannot set upon yourselves a foreign man" (Devarim 17:15). This means that a King of Israel can only be a man whose mother and father are Jewish—a convert cannot become a King of Israel.

Now King Agrifas was the grandson of Herod who was a convert, and on his mother's side he also came from a family of converts. And so when he stood and read the Torah one Hakhel and came to the verse in Devarim in our Parshah that says, "you cannot set upon yourselves a foreign man," he eyes flowed with tears, "because this verse disqualified him from the monarchy" (Rashi).

But the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 41a) tells that when this happens, "they said to him, 'Fear not, Agrifas! You are our brother! You are our brother!'"

The Jewish Nation loved this good and humble king, and so they consoled him and said to him that they consider him like their very own brother, even though the truth was that he was not fit to be king—that's how much they loved him. (See Hisvaduyos 5748, Vol. I pg. 314.)

And the humility of Agrifas can also be seen in the following story.

In those days, the wedding custom was that the bride would be walked from her house to the wedding hall in a great procession, with live musicians and a lot of joy.

Not to be morbid, but there is an interesting Jewish law, about what you do if you're walking along in a procession accompanying a bride to her wedding, and a funeral procession starts coming the other direction. So on one side they're escorting the bride and on the other they're escorting the deceased. The question is which procession must move to the side and let the other one pass—which one has the right of way?

So the Talmud tells us, "*Tanu Rabanan*—the Sages taught: We remove the deceased from before the bride." Meaning, the funeral must go another way and clear the road for the bride.

And the Talmud concludes: "And both [must be removed] before a King of Israel." This means that if the king's procession comes across a bridal procession, even the bride must make way for the king—the king comes before the bride. The Talmud continues, saying, "They said of Agrifas that he removed himself from before a bride, and the Sages praised him" (Tractate 17a). So again in this case, King Agrifas acted with humility and cleared the way for a bride, even though by law he came before the bride.

We now find ourselves in the month of Elul—the month in which we wrap up the year and prepare for the new year coming upon us for good.

Now there are those who get very busy with *cheshbon nefesh*—with spiritual and moral stocktaking. They look into everything they didn't do that they should have done in the past year and try to correct these things—if they insulted or offended someone, they go to make amends in person and ask for forgiveness.

But the Rebbe comes along and points out that the statement of the Sages, “We remove the deceased from before the bride,” teaches us a very important moral lesson in preparing for the new year.

The Rebbe says that whatever happened in the past year is categorized as “deceased.” It’s history. It’s over. It happened already. The new year coming upon us, however, is categorized as the “bride,” as a new life that is only now beginning.

So along come the Sages to teach us that “we remove the deceased from before the bride”—that instead of fretting over the past, it’s better to prepare for the future. Instead of obsessing about what I did wrong last year and telling myself that it’s terrible that I didn’t do such-and-such, instead of torturing myself that I didn’t use my time wisely, instead of busying myself with regrets, it’s far better to prepare and take on good new resolutions on what I’m going to do for the next year.

And then, when the “bride” comes—when the new year enters—even the “king,” meaning, the King of Kings, G-d Himself, “makes way for the bride.” When we set ourselves in such a positive spirit and frame of mind, then G-d is prepared to embrace us and give us all a good and sweet new year.

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