



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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***Beilis & the Talmud on Trial***

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# Bamidbar

## Beilis & the Talmud on Trial

Believe it or not, in Jordan, the entire Talmud was recently translated to Arabic, with 20 volumes becoming available. It took over six years for 90 Arabic scholars to translate the Talmud from Aramaic to Arabic—and once it went to print, it went on sale all over the Arab world.

The editors of the project pride themselves on the fact that it's a first-ever and historical breakthrough. They explained that they wanted to present to the Arab academic world the roots of Jewish thinking as found in the Talmud Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud. And their translation has already been dubbed "the Ninety Translation."

But for all of Jewish history, Jews have had mixed feelings about translating the Talmud. On the one hand, it's very good when people seek out Jewish thinking. But on the other hand, there can be major problems from this, because when they find certain expressions in the Talmud that have not been translated properly, they can be interpreted as attacks on other religions. And I'd like to give you one example of this.

In the Ukrainian city of Kiev, over 100 years ago a few days before Pesach, a couple of kids were playing in a field, when they suddenly came across the body of a dead child lying in a cave. The poor child's hands were tied behind him and his body bore signs of mutilation. It was quickly determined that the victim was a 12-year-old kid who had vanished from his home 12 days earlier.

Jew-haters quickly jumped at the opportunity, claiming that the Jews had murdered him in order to mix his blood into their matzos. Even as recently as a century ago, blood libels were very serious matters—and in this situation, the whole old lie was stirred up anew. A Jewish "suspect" by the name of Mendel Beilis, a brick factory supervisor, was quickly found.

Somebody claimed (falsely, of course), that he had seen Beilis in the area running after the child. Mr. Beilis was arrested and a lot of unrest broke out. The funeral of the child turned into a giant anti-Semitic rally, and at the burial, leaflets were distributed calling for riots against the Jews.

Anti-Semitic priests started inciting the masses in every city and town that the Jews murder Christians to use their blood. It became clear that if Beilis, G-d forbid, was found guilty in the lad's murder, there would be pogroms in every Russian city.

At the time, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn (the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1860-1920), got involved in this case. The Rebbe wanted one of the best attorneys in Russia, a Jewish man by the name of Oscar Gruzenberg, to take it upon himself to represent Mendel Beilis and essentially defend the entire Jewish Nation. But Gruzenberg wasn't so quick to accept the mission.

The Rebbe Rashab sent his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn (1880-1950) (who in 1920 became the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe), along with another chosid to meet with Gruzenberg along with a personal letter in which he asked him to accept the defense work.

Now, Mr. Gruzenberg accepted the delegation with great respect. But when they told him that they had come on a mission from the Lubavitcher Rebbe with regards to the Beilis affair, he became deathly silent and he told them that the situation was very serious.

And then they gave him the Rebbe's letter.

Mr. Gruzenberg read it and became very emotional. He stood up and paced back and forth in his office, lost in thought. After some time, he said to them, "My *Yiddishe hartz* (Jewish heart) tells me that I must get involved in the matter with all my might. But on the other hand, my healthy intellect tells me that with me being on the defense team, it could make the general situation worse because the justice authorities will also select judges with a history of persecuting Jews."

But in the end, Gruzenberg agreed to accept the mission upon himself.

Now the rabbi of Moscow at the time, Rabbi Yaakov Mazah, who came from a Chabad family, took it upon himself together with a group of rabbis and investigators, to assist the lawyers to prove from the Talmud and Kabbalah that Jews were bound by a strict prohibition to not ingest even animal blood, how much more so human blood, G-d forbid.

But the prosecution brought "experts" of their own to try to prove from the same Talmud what the Jews really thought of Christians, etc.

One such "expert" was a Catholic priest (who, at the time, it turns out, had already been accused of blackmail) from the city of Tashkent named Justinas Pranaitis. Despite the fact that he could not read Hebrew or Aramaic and whose anti-Semitic book, *The Talmud Unmasked*, was largely plagiarized from earlier such books, he came along and said that he had convincing "proof" from the Talmud about what the Jews "really" thought about the gentiles.

For example, the Talmud (Tractate Yevamos 61a) actually does quote Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's comment on the verse in Yechezkel which says, "Atem Adam, You are human"—on which Rabbi Shimon comments, "You are called human and idol worshippers are not called human."

Quoting that, the priest turned to the judge and said: "If the Jews don't consider us to be human, they certainly can slaughter us and mix our blood into their matzah!" That argument was shortly heard throughout the world, and even the rabbinical delegation led by Rabbi Mazah could not find an intellectually satisfying response.

So one day, Rabbi Mazah got a letter from the legendary Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin, in which Rabbi Shapiro wrote that he had an explanation that would satisfy the objections of even the judge. Rabbi Shapiro explained that the "min hamedaber," the "species of speakers," (a reference to human beings, has four names in the Torah: *adam*, *ish*, *gever* and *enosh*, similar to how humans have several names in English: man, person, human being and Homo Sapiens.

Then, Rabbi Shapiro added something interesting in his letter: Each of those four names has a singular and plural form—except for "adam." One *ish*, two *ishim*; one *enosh*, two *anashim*; one *gever*, two *gvarim*—but "adam" has no plural form. In Hebrew, you don't say "two adamim."

Rabbi Shapiro explained that the word "adam" (man, or human) symbolizes the fact that all humans come from one single human (Adam, the first man), and that everyone feels that they are part of the same body. Everyone feels that the other is a part of him or her, part of his or her own flesh—and that this is only seen in the Jewish Nation, which collectively form one pillar.

When a Jew like Mendel Beilis is accused of murder, every Jew wherever he may be feels as if he is personally sitting on the bench of the accused. But with other nationalities, you don't find such solidarity: an Russian citizen will not be beside himself if he hears that there is an Russian at the other end of the world with nothing to eat. But go to a Jew and tell him that there's a Jew in China who is unable to celebrate Passover, he immediately asks what he must do to help that Jew.

The concept of one nation being like one human being is found in the Jewish Nation—and therefore, "You [the plural *atem*, not the singular *atah*] are called adam." The name "adam" expresses the unity of the Jewish Nation—but not, G-d forbid, that the nations of the world are not human.

And Chasidic philosophy takes this a bit deeper.

The word *adam* has two definitions, Chasidic philosophy notes. One comes from the root word *adamah*, earth or soil. Man's body was created out of earth, as the Torah (Bereishis 2:7) says, "And the L-rd G-d created the man of dust from the earth." And therefore, Adam is named after the earth.

Along with that, Chasidic philosophy quotes Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, known as “the Shelah,” who says that another definition of the word adam comes from the root word “adameh”—“I shall resemble.” This is a reference to G-d—specifically, to “resembling” G-d. That means that man is called adam because he or she is meant to “resemble G-d”—meaning, to be as spiritual as possible. This is seen in the Torah in the verse, “And G-d created the man in His image, in the image of G-d did He create him” (Bereishis 1:27).

The Rebbe explains (Tammuz 12, 5733—Sichos Kodosh 5733 Vol. II pg. 246) that the purpose of man throughout his life is to take the human body made of the lowest thing in the world, “dust from the earth,” and bring it to its ultimate height in this world by “resembling” G-d.

And that is accomplished by going in G-d’s ways: “And you shall walk in His ways,” as He taught us in His Torah—just as He is merciful, so too shall you be merciful.

Finally, in the year 1914, Mendel Beilis emerged innocent in court, and the entire Jewish Nation breathed a sigh of relief.

My friends, on Shavuot we read in the Torah, “In the third month... on this day, [the Jewish Nation] arrived in the Sinai Desert.” And in the very next verse, we read, “And they arrived in the Sinai Desert and camped there.” And then the Torah again says, “And Israel camped there opposite the mountain” (Shmos 19:1-2).

Now, grammatically speaking, any other place in which the Torah describes the encampments of the Jewish Nation in the desert, it always uses the plural form: “Vayis’u” (and they traveled), “Vayachanu” (and they encamped). The only place the Torah uses the singular form “Vayichan” (literally, and he encamped) is before the Giving of the Torah. And on this, Rashi famously comments: “Like one person with one heart”—which the Rebbe explains was the vessel, the vehicle by which the Jewish Nation merited receiving the Torah. Because they turned into one entity like one human being, one “adam.” Not “ishim” but “ish echad”—this was the preparation for receiving the Torah.

And so at Shavuot time, the best thing we can do spiritually is to try to feel a little bit more of that “one person with one heart.”