

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #9: – Chapter 6 (Part 1)
On *Kiddush Hashem* and Self-Sacrifice

I. The Problem

What happened when Nevukhadnetzar found out that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya – or, by the Babylonian names, Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego – had refused to obey his order to prostrate themselves before his idol?

Then Nevukhadnetzar, in his rage and fury, commanded that Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego be brought. So these men were brought before the king. Nevukhadnetzar spoke and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods, and that you do not worship the golden image which I set up? Now, if you are prepared that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you fall down and worship the image which I made – [then all is well.] But if you do not worship [it], you will immediately be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace – and who is the god that will save you from my hand?" Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "Nevukhadnetzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it is [His will], our God Whom we serve can save us from the burning fiery furnace and from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden image which you have set up." (3:13-18)^[1]

This response arouses the king's fury, inviting a harsh response:

Then Nevukhadnetzar was filled with rage, and the appearance of his face changed towards Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego. He spoke and commanded that the furnace be heated seven-fold beyond its normal heat. And he commanded the mightiest men in his army to bind Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their robes, their turbans, and their other garments, and were cast into the burning fiery furnace. Whereupon – since the king's command had been peremptory, and the furnace was exceedingly hot – the flame of the fire slew those men who had taken up Shadrakh, Meshakh, and Abed-Nego. And the three men – Shadrakh, Meshakh and Abed-Nego – fell, bound, into the burning fiery furnace. (6:19-23)

But Nevukhadnetzar's plan to annihilate Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya meets with failure. The king himself observes the three of them walking about alive inside the

furnace, along with the angel sent to save them. He is forced to acknowledge the superiority of God's Kingship and to admit to his own defeat.

In stating their refusal to worship Nevukhadnetzar's idol, the three men were certainly not relying on a miracle to save them; they were ready to die.^[2] This represents the clearest description anywhere in *Tanakh* of a state of readiness to die in sanctification of God's Name.^[3] Such situations do not generally arise in *Tanakh* because the pagan religions, by definition, were not zealous about forcing others to follow their beliefs. Here, however, the refusal of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya was an affront to Nevukhadnetzar's personal honor and an obstacle to his plan, and he therefore sentenced them to death.

Centuries later, starting from the Hellenistic period and the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, *Am Yisrael* was forced on many occasions to deal with the question of going against their faith and against God's commandments. In the Books of the Chashmonaim, we find stories of people who gave up their lives in sanctification of God's Name.^[4] Such episodes were repeated against the backdrop of the decrees issued by the Romans, and later during the ongoing persecution by Christianity and – to a lesser degree – Islam. The courage displayed by Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya and their readiness to give up their lives in sanctification of God's name served as a model for tens of thousands of Jews throughout the generations.

In the halakhic realm, as well, our chapter has served as the foundation of the discussion regarding the determination of the precise boundaries of the situations in which a Jew is called upon to give up his life rather than worship or accept any other god. Let us therefore examine the halakhic aspects of the story. Were Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya obligated to act as they did? If so, we would have to conclude that the rest of *Am Yisrael*, who obeyed Nevukhadnetzar and prostrated themselves before his idol, behaved improperly. Is this not too broad an accusation against the entire nation? Perhaps Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya were not obligated to give up their lives, and acted as they did out of their own personal view of the situation and not on the basis of the tradition they had received. Perhaps they acted beyond the letter of its law. Is it possible that they themselves acted improperly?^[5]

II. A foreign god

The situation in fact appears quite clear, as we are talking about idolatry. Indeed, the *gemara* records:

Thodos, a Roman, expounded further: For what reason did Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya give themselves up to the furnace in sanctification of God's Name? They deduced their obligation from the frogs [at the time of the plagues in Egypt]: Concerning frogs, which are not commanded concerning sanctification of God's Name, the Torah says, "They will come into your homes... and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls." When are kneading bowls found in proximity to the oven? When the oven is hot. [If the frogs willingly jumped into the fiery ovens

at God's command,] then certainly we, who are commanded concerning sanctification of God's Name, are required to do so. (*Pesachim* 53b)

The story seems to suggest that the image in question is the object of idolatrous worship. Indeed, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya tell Nevukhadnetzar:

"Let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden image which you have set up." (3:18)^[6]

According to this approach, which views Nevukhadnetzar's image as the object of idolatrous worship, the teaching attributed to Thodos in the *gemara* is the original source for the obligation to give up one's life rather than transgress the prohibition of *avoda zara*, in contrast to the usual principle of "and live by them."^[7]

However, many of the *Rishonim* adopt the approach of the *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot*,^[8] arguing that Nevukhadnetzar's creation was simply a "monument to honor the king" rather than actual idolatry. They maintain that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya were at no point commanded to worship Nevukhadnetzar's gods.

The *Tosafot* raise two questions concerning the opinion that the golden image represented idolatry:

1) If this was idolatry, why did Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya need to deduce their obligation (*kal va-chomer*) from the frogs, who willingly jumped into the ovens of Pharaoh and his servants at God's command, as the *midrash* and *gemara* suggest? The *halakha* states clearly and explicitly that concerning idolatry, one is required to give up his life rather than transgressing!

2) The *gemara* in *Ketuvot* 33b states: "Had they beaten Chanania, Mishael and Azarya mercilessly, they would have worshipped the image." This is most puzzling: Would they have agreed to engage in idolatry if they were beaten? Surely not. Thus, the situation could not have been actual idolatry.

Perhaps we can offer a solution to these questions. The requirement to give up one's life instead of performing a transgression in public (*be-farhesia*), whose source is unclear, was introduced only at the end of the period of the *Tannaim*. The very categorization of idolatry as a transgression that one must avoid even on pain of death is not a simple matter; according to R. Yishmael, if the setting is secluded, then one should perform the act and not be killed, following the general principle of "And live by them."^[9] Accordingly, it is not surprising that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya sought a source for the *halakha* to give up their lives in the Torah itself, even though the setting was a public one.^[10]

The *Geonim* rule accordingly in response to a question,^[11] adding a further aspect to the discussion, important in its own right – Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya deduced from the example set by the frogs that their duty was to **willingly** enter the

furnace and commit **suicide** before they could be forced into worshipping another god, like King Shaul, who fell upon his own sword. This extensive topic will be explored at the end of our discussion of this chapter.[\[12\]](#)

Even if the image was indeed idolatry, it is not clear from the Halakha that a person is obligated to undergo suffering and torture in order to fulfill the commandment of sanctifying God's Name, which would explain the statement in *Ketuvot* 33b that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya would not have tolerated a severe beating. It may be that in this area, too, we must make a distinction between death in sanctification of God's Name and the suffering or torture that this may entail. The obligation to give up one's life and not commit idolatry is deduced in the discussion in *Sanhderin* (74a) from the verse, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." According to the interpretation of R. Akiva in *Berakhot* (61b), "With all your soul" means "even if He takes your soul" – that is, even if you must give up your life for His sake. This interpretation applies specifically to the matter of death itself; it is based on the logical foundation that it is God Who invests one with his soul and his life in the first place, and therefore He may require a person to give up his life in certain circumstances. This is the meaning of Iyov's famous statement: "God has given and God has taken; may the Name of God be blessed" (*Iyov* 1:21). Despite his declaration, however, *Iyov* goes on to ask, throughout the *Sefer*, whether this implies that a person is obligated to stand up to any and every suffering to avoid a desecration of God's Name. Indeed, God has given us life, and He may therefore require us to give it back, but can we understand a requirement to suffer? That level is lower than death and ceasing to exist, but entails much more pain.

The question continued to be debated even after Iyov. Further on in the discussion in *Berakhot* (61b), we read of the sanctification of God's Name by R. Akiva himself, who publicly declared his acceptance of the yoke of Heaven while his flesh was being tortured with iron combs. His disciples, who knew the halakha concerning *Kiddush Hashem* from R. Akiva's own teacher, R. Eliezer, pose the famous question – "Our teacher – even to this degree?!" Perhaps it is Iyov's distinction that they are referring to. It is one thing to be prepared to die in sanctification of God's Name, but what about having one's flesh shredded with iron combs?

The same consideration may be applied concerning the deduction "*kal va-chomer*" which Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya draw for themselves from the example of the frogs, according to the teaching of Thodos the Roman. When it comes to a strange and unnatural death – being thrown live into a fiery furnace – the obligation to give up one's life, which seems clear in our conventional tradition, may require some additional basis.[\[13\]](#)

Over the generations, there have been many examples of Jews who gave up their lives and died strange and unnatural deaths in sanctification of God's Name, from the time of the Chashmonaim to the period of the Crusades and to time of the Inquisition. A comprehensive review of this history is beyond the scope of the present series.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] This episode is discussed at length in *Sanhedrin* 92b–93a.

[2] This is explicitly stated in the text (verse 18). We will later discuss the parallel narrative concerning Avraham, who was cast into the furnace by Nimrod. The *midrash* records that Haran, Avraham's brother, was also cast into the furnace, but he was not saved. The message of the *midrash* seems to be that Haran meant to offer his life in sanctification of God's Name with the intention of being miraculously saved, as he had observed Avraham's salvation. No miracle occurred for him. Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya, in contrast, were willing to be cast into the furnace with no thought of any miraculous intervention; they believed they were about to be burned alive.

[3] *Sefer Daniel* records another instance of self-sacrifice for the sanctification of God's Name – the story of Daniel being cast into the lion's den for his devotion in prayer (chapter 6), which we will discuss at a later point. Does the story of Mordechai, who refused to bow before Haman, belong to the same category? See our article, "Mordechai did not bow nor did he prostrate himself – Why?" (Heb.) in A. Bazak (ed.), *Hadassa Hi Ester* (Alon Shevut, 5757), pp. 151-170.

[4] This will be discussed at length in the final *shiur* of this series.

[5] The possibility of giving up one's life rather than committing a transgression that does not demand this sacrifice is debated among the *posekim*; see below.

[6] From Rashi's commentary on *Daniel* 3:2 and from his words on *Pesachim* 53b, it seems that this is a clear instance of idolatry. The same impression arises from the *gemara* in *Megilla* 12a; this point is made explicitly in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 7:1 on the verse, "Your stature is like that of a palm tree" (7:8) and in the *Midrash Ha-Gadol* on *Parashat Va'era* 9:8 (Margaliot edition, p. 122). This approach is also adopted by R. Achai Gaon in *She'iltot, Vaera* (*she'ilta* 42; in Mirsky edition, *she'ilta* 44), as well as others.

[7] This opinion is explicit in the Midrash; see *Vayikra Rabba* 33 at length.

[8] See Tosafot on *Pesachim* 53b, as well as most of the *Rishonim* on *Ketuvot* 33b and *Sanhedrin* 74a. The Tosafot in *Pesachim*, as well as the Ramban and those who adopt his approach in *Ketuvot*, address the difficulty inherent in the verse from *Daniel* and offer various solutions.

[9] See *Avoda Zara* 27b and Tosafot, *ibid.* 54a. In *Sanhedrin* 74a, R. Yishmael teaches: "From where do we learn that if a person is told, 'Perform this idolatry and you will not be killed,' that he must perform it and not be killed? We learn from the words, 'And live by them' – he should not die by them... Is this the case even [if the deed is to be performed] in public? We learn, 'You shall not desecrate My holy Name, and I shall be sanctified' [hence, the situation is different when the act is performed in public]."

[10] The words of Rabbeinu Tam, who argues against Rashi's approach in this regard, express the fundamental view of the *Ba'alei Ha-Tosfot* that there can be no possibility of a person not being required to give up his life in order to avoid idolatry. Another example is to be found in the Tosafot on *Avoda Zara* 54a. There, the Tosafot maintain that according to the rules of halakhic decision-making, the practical conclusion should seemingly follow the opinion of R. Yishmael – that in a private setting, a person must acquiesce to idolatry and not be killed. The Tosafot comment: "This is problematic, for heaven forefend that we should conclude that a person should commit idolatry and not give up his life!" In the generation of the Tosafot, the period of the Crusades, there was a very strong consciousness of *Kiddush Hashem*, and the requirement to give up one's life rather than transgress the prohibition of idolatry appeared to them to be an obvious matter requiring no further discussion. Here, too, the Tosafot do not accept Rashi's view that the image represented idolatry but that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya should nevertheless have concluded that their obligation was "and live by them," in accordance with R. Yishmael's view, and bowed to the image.

[11] See Otzar ha-Geonim, *Sanhedrin* 74, Toyvesh Edition, p. 428, *teshuva* 982.

[12] See Tosafot, *Pesachim* 54, the opinion of the Ri.; Tosafot, *Avoda Zara* 18a; *Ba'alei Ha-Tosafot al Ha-Torah, Bereishit* 9; Maharshah, *Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama*, chapter 8, *siman* 59, and many other examples.

[\[13\]](#) A view similar to the one we have taken here appears in the *Shita Mekubetzet* on *Ketuvot* 33 in the name of R. Eliezer; the Ritva disagrees there.