

SEFER DANIEL
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Shiur #10: Chapter 6b:
On Kiddush Ha-Shem and Self-Sacrifice (continued)

3. Monuments to Honor Kings

Let us return to the view of the Ba'alei ha-Tosafot, as well as other *posekim*, who maintain that the image was a monument honoring Nevukhadnetzar and not an idol. What, then, was the problem with bowing before it, and why did Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya take upon themselves a stricter view prohibiting it?

We find three main approaches in explaining the behavior of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya:

a. The view of the Tosafot Sans in *Sanhedrin* 74a, echoed by other *posekim*, according to whom the situation did not involve any question of idolatry, but rather an extra measure of piety: "They clung so closely to their Creator that they would bow only to Him."^[1] In this regard, the Tosafot Sans follows the approach of the other Tosafot,^[2] according to which a person may give up his life even when the Halakha does not technically require this of him. This, in general, is the opinion of the Ashkenazi sages.

b. According to the Rambam (and, following his example, the sages of Spain), a person is absolutely forbidden to give up his life in a situation in which he is not halakhically obligated to do so. The Rambam seems to agree that there was no clear prohibition of idolatry involved here, but in the context of a decree aimed at negating or abolishing the Jewish faith, even the slightest trace or hint of idolatry must be viewed strictly:

The entire house of Israel is commanded concerning this great sanctification of God's Name, as it is written, "And I shall be sanctified amongst *Bnei Yisrael*." And we are warned against desecrating [God's Name], as it is written, "And you shall not desecrate My holy Name." How [are these obligations fulfilled?] When a non-Jew arises and forces a Jew to transgress any one of the commandments stated in the Torah on pain of death, he should transgress the law and not be killed... To what does this refer? To all commandments other than idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. But concerning these three, if he says to him, "Transgress one of these or you will be killed," he must be killed and not transgress... And all of this applies when the context is not one of decrees aimed against the Jewish faith (*she'at shemad*). At a time of such decrees – when an evil king like Nevukhadnetzar or the like arises and issues decrees against the

Jews, to nullify their faith or any one of the commandments – then he must be killed and not transgress. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 5:1-3)

The Rambam's words here concerning a "*sha'at shemad*" are taken from the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin*:

R. Dimai taught, in the name of R. Yochanan: All of this applies only when there is no royal decree, but at a time of a royal decree one should be killed even for a minor law, rather than transgressing... What is a "minor law"? Rava, son of R. Yitzchak, said in the name of Rav: Even concerning a change in one's shoe strap.^[3] (*Sanhedrin* 74b)

The example cited by the Rambam for a "time of a royal decree" is, "when there arises a wicked king such as Nevukhadnetzar or the like." Apparently, he is referring to our narrative. Thus, according to the Rambam as well, the problem here was not one of idolatry – concerning which one is always required to give up his life, even when no royal decree aimed at nullifying Jewish belief is involved.^[4] If the image set up by Nevukhadnetzar was not actually idolatry, then we must clarify what the problem was in bowing before it, for it is permissible to bow in honor for a ruler – just as, for instance, Yosef's brothers bowed down to the ground before him twice, and Natan, the prophet, bowed before David. Seemingly, even at a time of a royal decree there is no problem involved in this.^[5]

c. The opinion of the Nimukei Yosef in *Sanhedrin* is that the stringent conclusion drawn by the three men arose from their concern for "*mar'at ayin*." They acted as they did to sanctify God's name because others mistakenly perceived the image as an idol for worship.^[6]

From the opinion of the Nimukei Yosef, it appears that only a leading Torah leader of the generation is permitted to act in this manner, and only concerning a transgression which is widely transgressed in that generation, in order to demonstrate the severity of this laxity and to thereby sanctify God's Name as an emergency measure. It is possible that this approach is deduced from the incident recorded in the *gemara* concerning Elisha Ba'al Kenafayim at the time of the Roman decrees:

Once, the wicked Roman rulers passed a decree on the Jews that anyone who lay *tefillin* would have his brains pierced. Elisha put on his *tefillin* and went out to the marketplace. A certain officer saw him; he fled from him, and the latter pursued him. When he drew close, Elisha removed the *tefillin* from his head and held them in his hand. The officer said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He answered, "A dove's wings." He opened his hand, revealing a dove's wings. Therefore, he was called Elisha *Ba'al Kenafayim* ["Elisha with wings"]. (*Shabbat* 49a)

The *Rishonim* debate the question of why Elisha endangered himself for the sake of the *mitzva* of *tefillin*, which is not included in the category of *yehareg ve-al ya'avor*.

Moreover, the *gemara* (*Shabbat* 130a) proves from this story that this mitzvah is actually one for which Jews did not give up their lives (see Tosafot ad loc., who question this). By joining these two *sugyot* together, we conclude that a leader of the generation may indeed give up his life for a "minor" *mitzva* when it is neglected by the rest of the nation. Therefore, since *Am Yisrael* were not giving up their lives for the sake of *tefillin*, which had been outlawed by the Romans, Elisha was ready to give up his life, even though he was not halakhically required to do so, in order to demonstrate the importance of this *mitzvah*.^[7]

According to this approach, what we can learn here is that while under Nevukhadnetzar's rule in Babylon, *Am Yisrael* were being unmindful of the prohibition of idolatry – or, at least, situations reminiscent of or associated with idolatry. Therefore, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya – who, it appears, could be considered among the leaders of the generation – felt it necessary to give up their lives even for a situation that only looked like idolatry, in order to set a personal example.

There are two sources that support this possibility. The first arises from the words of Yechezkel:

That which comes to your mind shall not come to pass; for you say: We shall be like the nations, like the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone. (*Yechezkel* 20:32)

Chazal provide the following description of the laxity of the exiles in Babylon concerning idolatry, or at least the perception of it:

Bnei Yisrael said to Yechezkel, as it is written, "Certain of the elders of Israel came to me and they sat before me" (*Yechezkel* 20:1). They said to him: "Yechezkel, if a servant is sold by his master, does he not leave his ownership?" He answered them, "Indeed." They said to him, "Since God has sold us to the nations of the world, we have left His ownership!" He said to them, "But a servant who is sold by his master with the intention that he will return – has he then left his ownership?" (*Sifri, Bamidbar* 115; see also *Tanchuma, Nitzavim* 3).

The new political and spiritual circumstances – exile, the move to a different land and a different culture, the shattering of the long-established framework that included *Eretz Yisrael*, Jewish sovereignty, and commitment to Torah and *mitzvot* – opened a breach. Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya found it necessary to close it.

There is an additional source that sheds light on the impropriety of *Bnei Yisrael* during this period when it came to idolatry:

The students of R. Shimon ben Yochai asked him: "Why was annihilation decreed upon the Jews of that generation [of Esther and Mordechai] by their enemies?"... He told them, "Because they prostrated themselves to an image." They said to him, "Where, then, is the justice in what happened?" [Rashi: How,

then, were they deserving of the miracle?] He said to them, "They only acted outwardly; therefore, God, too, acted towards them [bringing the threat of annihilation] only outwardly." (*Megilla* 12a)

In other words, even though they acted only out of coercion ("outwardly"), the Sages criticize the Jews for their weakness in this regard. The heroic gesture of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya was necessary in order to strengthen them, as in the situation described by the Nimukei Yosef.

The Me'iri^[8] maintains that the image, although apparently indeed a monument in the image of Nevukhadnetzar, was nevertheless pure idolatry. However, this was "idolatry for his own enjoyment," not for the purposes of having the nations relinquish their religion. Apparently, if a person demands that all nations and tongues simultaneously fall and prostrate themselves before his image, even if to his own superficial understanding his motivations are not religious, by virtue of his very command he attributes divine honor to himself, thereby turning himself into a god. Although his intention is to enjoy the honor that will be shown to him and not to change anyone's religion, his act is of a religious nature that borders on idolatry.^[9] According to the view of the Me'iri, it would seem that from a purely halakhic perspective, there would have been room for some leniency in this regard; to his view, there is no obligation to give up one's life for the prohibition of idolatry if the decree is solely for the pleasure and self-importance of the ruler who issues it.^[10] However, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya chose to adopt a stricter standard for themselves (apparently, along the lines of the position of Tosfot Sans, above.)

Most of the *Rishonim* disagree with the Me'iri in this regard, maintaining that regarding idolatry and sexual immorality, one must always give up one's life, not only where the intention of the decree involves a denial of one's faith. To their view, in the scenario presented by the Me'iri, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya were required to give up their lives – as indeed they did – even though Nevukhadnetzar did not mean for them to give up their faith, in the conventional "religious" sense, but rather only to enjoy his own sense of self-importance. This position proceeds from the assumption that his self-exaltation did indeed border on viewing and presenting himself as a deity.

In recent generations we have seen some prominent examples of a similar degree of veneration. These include the idolization of Lenin in the Soviet Union, up until his death; the adulation with which Stalin surrounded himself during his rule; the admiration for Mao Tse Tung in China during the country's "Cultural Revolution;"^[11] and the halo of glory which Saddam Hussein created for himself at the peak of his power.^[12] These rulers, most of whom were atheists, instituted fundamentalist, religious worship directed towards themselves. It is possible that, as a result, their regimes came close to falling under the category of idolatry, and their removal from the stage of history represented the fulfillment of the words from the *Aleinu* prayer: "*Ve-ha-elilim karot yikaretun*" ("and completely cut off all false gods").

The advantage of the Me'iri's approach, for our purposes, is that the question of whether Nevukhadnetzar's image represented idolatry is left without an unequivocal answer. It depends on the interpretation of his intention and to what degree his desire for glory assumed religious significance. The difference in possible interpretation leads to two opposing views regarding how to deal with a situation that cannot be unequivocally defined as idolatry.

A similar debate took place between Mordekhai and the sages of his own generation:

And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and prostrated themselves before Haman, for the king had commanded them thus, but Mordekhai did not bow, nor did he prostrate himself. The king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordekhai, "Why do you transgress the king's commandment?" Now it was that since they said this to him daily, and he did not listen to them, they told Haman, to see whether Mordekhai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordekhai did not bow or prostrate himself before him, Haman was full of fury. But it seemed ignominious in his eyes to lay a hand on Mordekhai alone, for they had informed him of Mordekhai's people, so Haman sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire kingdom of Achashverosh; the people of Mordekhai. (*Esther* 3:2-6)

According to the *midrash*, the "king's servants" who argued with and chided Mordekhai were in fact the sages of his generation:

"The king's servants" – these were the *dayyanim*... They said to him: "Let it be known to you that you are bringing about our slaying by the sword."[\[13\]](#)

From the *midrash*, it would appear that their claims were legitimate. Hence, the situation obviously did not involve an unequivocal prohibition of idolatry, and there was room for leniency. Rashi (ad loc.) seems to support this interpretation:

"Bowing and prostrating themselves" – for he [Haman] made himself into a god. Therefore, "Mordekhai did not bow, nor did he prostrate himself."[\[14\]](#)

The comparison between Mordekhai and Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya is inescapable:

"My sister, my fair one, my dove, my perfect one:" "My sister" – in Babylon, [with the words,] "We shall not serve your gods" (*Daniel* 3:18); "My fair one" – in Media, [with the words,] "But Mordekhai did not bow, nor did he prostrate himself" (*Esther* 3:2). (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shir Ha-shirim, remez* 988)

The Targum Rishon on *Esther* (3:2) provides an additional hint to the connection with our situation:

And all the king's servants that were at the gate of the king's house bowed to the monument which he had set up in public.

According to the Targum, Haman set up a monument with his own image, and it was to this that people bowed. Seemingly, this interpretation is borrowed from the monument which Nevukhadnetzar set up for his own glory.

Was the decision of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya to give up their lives in sanctification of God's Name indeed clear-cut in terms of halakha? What the position of the other leaders of their generation?

Two *midrashim* present the position of the prophet Yechezkel, who was in Babylon at the time of Nevukhadnetzar's decree. In both sources, he is shown to disagree with the decision of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya:

They immediately went to Yechezkel, and said to him: "Shall we bow down or not?" He told them, "I received a tradition from Yeshayahu, my teacher: "Hide yourself for a brief moment, until the wrath has passed by" (*Yeshayahu* 26:20). [I.e., Keep a low profile and you will not have to bow down...] They said to him, "We wish to disgrace the image by being present but not bowing down to it, so that people will say: All the nations bow down to this image, except for Israel." (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 7:1).

Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya wished to sanctify God's Name by standing in front of the image and not bowing down to it, knowing that for this they would be killed. Further on in the *midrash*, Yechezkel informs them that God has spoken to him and He does not wish them to follow this course of action. They must rather flee and hide, thereby removing themselves from danger. Seemingly, it would have been possible for them to conceal themselves in such a way that Nevukhadnetzar's forces would not have been able to seize them. Nevertheless, Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya went ahead and did as they had intended to do, and God repaid them in kind. Their confrontation with Nevukhadnetzar was not a situation that was forced upon them, but rather their own principled, informed, and deliberate choice.[\[15\]](#)

It may be that the *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabba* understood the situation in this way, too, and therefore views the decision of the three men as close to suicide:

["But (*ve-akh*) your blood of your own lives I shall require" (*Bereishit* 9:5)] – to include one who takes his own life. Does this then include Shaul? [No,] as it is written, "*akh*" [but]. Does this include Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya? [No,] as it is written, "*akh*." (*Bereishit Rabba* 34:13)

Nevertheless, the *midrash* finds them innocent, since their intention was to sanctify God's Name.

(To be continued)

[1] A similar view is expressed by the Maharsha in his *Chiddushei Aggadot* on *Megilla* 12a, explaining that this gesture was meant to give glory to God; there are other views in the same vein as well.

[2] As cited in the Tosafot on *Avoda Zara* 27b, s.v. *yakhol*.

[3] Rashi (ad loc.) explains this demand on the part of the gentile rulers as follows: "For if it was customary among the gentiles to tie their shoes in one way, and among the Jews some other way; if there is a Jewish principle involved, and the Jewish manner is to be modest, then even this change – which does not involve a commandment, but rather something which is purely a custom – requires that he sanctify God's Name before his fellow Jews..." This explanation is difficult to accept. According to the *Geonim*, in contrast (*Otzar ha-Geonim, Sanhedrin, siman* 983), this is a reference to a person who is commanded to bow his head in order to tie his shoelace before an idol that serves as pagan worship. Even though he is not commanded to worship it, his action will be interpreted in that way. In the *Sifrei ha-Chashmonaim*, in the story of the woman and her seven sons, the king commands the youngest child to lift his royal seal from the floor in front of the idol, such that he will appear to be bowing. The child refuses, giving up his life in sanctification of God's Name. According to the *Geonim*, this represents the *halakha* at a time of a royal decree: to give up one's life rather than to create even a false impression of engaging in idolatry.

[4] In his *Iggeret ha-Shemad* (*Iggerot ha-Rambam*, Rabinowitz Edition, Jerusalem 5741, p. 42), the Rambam refers to Nevukhadnetzar's image as idolatry. However, it should be pointed out that there are also other discrepancies between the Rambam's rulings in his *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* and what he writes in the *Iggeret ha-Shemad*. In any event, the subject requires further clarification.

[5] Similarly, in *Megillat Esther* (3:2), Mordekhai refuses to bow before Haman, even though from the literal text it appears that here, too, the obligation to bow was a matter of honor to the ruler. The question in Mordekhai's case is even stronger than in ours for another reason, as well: because of his stubborn refusal, he endangered not only himself, but all of *Am Yisrael*. The commentators adopt different explanations for his behavior. For a summary of these, see our article, "Mordekhai did not bow nor did he prostrate himself – Why?" (Heb.) in A. Bazak (ed.), *Hadassa Hi Ester* (Alon Shevut, 5757), pp. 151-170, especially section c., which discusses the parallels between the narrative in the *Megilla* and the story of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya.

[6] Similar explanations are offered by the Ramban, Rashba, and the Ra'ah in *Ketuvot*. We shall presently discuss their approach, which differs slightly from that of Nimukei Yosef. The Nimukei Yosef bases his words on the *midrash*, "Why do you give up your life?" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, parsha* 6). The *midrash* enumerates *mitzvot* which are not included in the category of "*yehareg ve-al ya'avur*," but one nevertheless must give up his life for them. In his view, this sacrifice is an immediate, emergency measure aimed at serving as an example for others. However, in his *Mishpat Kohen* (*siman* 144), R. Kook implies that the Rambam would not accept this understanding.

[7] We may assume that this incident took place during the period of the Hadrianic decrees, following the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt. R. Akiva's students would go about at all times wearing their *tefillin*. It was for this reason that the Romans issued a decree specifically concerning *tefillin*, as part of their persecution of the students of R. Akiva, who had led the rebellion. (This hypothesis was suggested by my rabbi and teacher, R. Yoel bin-Nun.)

[8] *Sanhedrin* 74a. See also the opinion of the Ramban in *Milchamot Hashem* ad loc. ("*Amar Abaye*," at the end).

[9] Actually, the story in the *Megilla* may be viewed in the same way. The *midrash* already cites an opinion according to which Haman's decree had some connection with idolatry, and that this explains Mordekhai's refusal to bow before him (*Esther Rabba* 7:6). There, the situation involved some sort of pagan symbol that was embroidered on Haman's garment, such that whoever bowed before him was at the same time bowing to this image. As explained in our article (cited above, n.5) this understanding turns Haman from an adversarial political figure into an adversarial religious figure. Rashi, too, in commenting on *Esther* 3:2, asserts a connection between Haman and idolatry, but in a different sense. To his view,

Haman "made himself a god," and for this reason Mordekhai refused to bow before him. This view, according to which a person who flaunts his political power and his seemingly almighty status is defined as having placed himself within the category of idolatry, parallels the view of the Me'iri concerning the actions of Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya. See further in our article, cited above, pp. 153-154, 161.

[10] In pursuing his interpretation, the Me'iri follows those *Rishonim* who maintain that even the three prohibitions defined as "*yehareg ve-al ya'avur*" do not require one to give up his life if they are decreed solely for the self-importance of the ruler, but only if his intention in coercing the action is to demonstrate that the Jew denies his faith and/or its precepts. Although the *halakha* does not follow this view, his explanation of the essence of the transgression involved is important the purposes of our discussion.

This approach reflects the opinion of the Razah on *Sanhedrin* 74b, and several *Rishonim* rule accordingly. However, most of the *Rishonim* – the Rambam among them – disagree, maintaining that when it comes to the three *mitzvot* of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder, one is always required to give up one's life rather than transgress. The *Rishonim* among the first group, who find room for leniency, are divided as to their understanding of the sub-divisions within these laws. Only the Ba'al ha-Eshkol (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, p. 119), rules that one may be lenient even in the case of killing another person, if the decree is "for the pleasure of him who coerces it." The Razah rules strictly concerning killing and idolatry, asserting that any act of idolatrous worship is intended as a denial of faith; he is lenient only in the case of sexual immorality, which is not coerced with the intention of having the person engaged in it deny his faith. The Me'iri is lenient concerning idolatry and sexual immorality that is imposed "for the self-importance of the one who decrees it," but rules strictly concerning killing. It is this view which we discuss above. However, in reaching his conclusion, the Me'iri seems to retract his position and side with the Tosafot, who rule strictly in all these instances.

[11] In the name of his veneration and the burning of all books except for the Little Red Book with selected quotations from his speeches and writings, millions of Chinese were persecuted and killed during this period.

[12] To these examples we may add the divinity of the Japanese Emperor, until Japan was defeated in the nuclear attack launched on it by the US towards the end of the Second World War.

[13] *Midrash Panim Acherim*, version 2, *parsha* 3 (Vilna, 5647), p. 66; cited also in *Torah Sheleimah*, 17, 21. See further in the Targum Rishon on *Esther* 6:11 and in *Yalkut Shimoni Esther*, *remez*1053. This is also noted by R. Avigdor Katz (one of the Tosafot) in his commentary on the *Megilla*.

[14] See also *Midrash Abba Gurion*, *parsha* 3 (Buber Edition, p. 22), and *Midrash Lekach Tov* (*ibid.*, p. 97), as well as the commentary of Ralbag.

[15] A similar possibility arises from the *teshuva* of the *Geonim* (*Otzar ha-Geonim*, *Sanhedrin siman* 982). According to the interpretation proposed there for the *gemara* in *Pesachim*, which explains that Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya took their example from the frogs in Egypt, this is precisely what they deduced: that they were required to give up their lives *le-khat'hila* (out of choice), as the frogs had done, willingly entering the ovens of the Egyptians. To our view, even though it is not cited there, the source for this interpretation is the *midrash* in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* cited above.