

חמודי שי על התורה והמועדים

Chamudei Shai on the Torah and Holidays

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Topics discussed

Tisha B'Av

- ▶ **An explanation of Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon's martyrdom in sanctification of Hashem's Name**
- ▶ **Why Rebbi Chanina didn't agree to hasten his own death**
- ▶ **Why he agreed to allow the gentile executioner to hasten his death**
- ▶ **His fear that his torments would lead him to question Hashem**

Tisha B'Av and Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon

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Explaining the martyrdom and death of Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon

One of the most moving parts of the services of *Yom Kippur* and *Tisha B'Av* is the account of the cruel executions of the famous ten martyrs (on *Yom Kippur* in the *piyyut*, "Eileh Ezkerah" and on *Tisha B'Av* in the *kinah*, "Arzei Halevanon"). One of these martyrs was Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon, whose "crime" was to teach Torah publicly. The Romans paid him back in kind by publicly burning him with the Torah scroll that he taught from.

The source of the story is in *Maseches Avodah Zarah* 18a:

[The Romans] found Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon, who was sitting and learning Torah and gathering public groups, with a Torah scroll in his lap.

They brought him [to be sentenced] and wrapped him in the Torah scroll and surrounded him with bundles of branches and set fire to them. They brought tufts of wool and soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that his soul would not leave him quickly.

His daughter told him, "Father, must I see you like this?" He told her, "If I alone were being burned, the matter would have been difficult for me. But now that I am being burned together with a Torah scroll, He Who

seeks [retribution for] the insult to the Torah scroll will seek [retribution] for the insult to me."

His students said to him, "Our Rebbi, what do you see?" He told them, "The parchment is burning, and the letters are flying." [They said to him,] "Open your mouth, and let the fire enter [you]." He told them, "Better that He Who gave it should take it and I not harm myself."

The executioner said to him, "My Rebbi, if I increase the flame and take the tufts of wool off your heart, will you promise me life in the World to Come?" He told him, "Yes." [The executioner said to him,] "Swear to me!" He swore to him. Immediately, [the executioner] increased the flame and removed the tufts of wool on [Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon's] heart. His soul left quickly. [The executioner] leaped into the fire. A heavenly voice proclaimed, "Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon and the executioner are destined for the life of the World to Come."

Rebbi [Rebbi Yehudah Hanasi] wept and said, "There is a person who acquires his World [to Come] in [only] one hour and someone who acquires his World [to Come only] after a number of years."

Why Rebbi Chanina didn't agree to hasten his own death but agreed to have a gentile do so?

Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon was prepared to suffer to sanctify Hashem's name, and to that end he refused to hasten his own death. Nevertheless, he agreed to allow a gentile to do so and, furthermore, promised that gentile the life of the World to Come. *But why did he agree?*

One may say that when Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon said that he saw the parchment burning and the letters flying, he was referring not only to the Torah scroll, but to himself as well: as his body was being burned, his soul, which is compared to the letters of the Torah, flew up to its Father in heaven, and he wanted his soul to rise with holiness and purity, like letters of the Torah, to eternal life.

However, Rebbi Chanina feared that as a result of the severe torments he was suffering, he would soon question the justice of Hashem and regret having taught the people Torah. He would lose his merits and damage his soul. He feared his soul would no longer be comparable to the lights and letters of the Torah, and he would lose his share in the World to Come. Thus, he found himself caught in a dilemma. To actively take his life was forbidden, but to continue suffering without a degradation of his spirituality, was no longer possible.

The executioner resolved a dilemma similar to the ram at "Akeidas Yitzchak"

One may say that Hashem opened the eyes and heart of the executioner to see Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon's holiness and greatness (see *Tosafos* ibid. s.v. *Mah Atah Roeh* on the executioner's exalted spiritual attainment) and in contrast the vanities of this world, and he yearned for truth and the life of the World to Come. That insight is similar to Avraham gaining sight of the ram caught in the thicket, which made it possible for him to consummate the *Akeidah*, thus sanctifying Hashem's Name completely and with all the necessary pure intentions. To that end, in order that he be spared casting any doubt on Hashem's justice or regretting his earlier good deeds, he was prepared to hasten his death via the agency of another

person, and even at the cost of promising a gentile the World to Come.

Proof from Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah

When I related this idea to my teacher and dear friend, the *gaon* Rabbi Yochanan Bechhofer, author of *Even Shesiyah*, he agreed that this is certainly the straightforward meaning of this story. He added that this idea is consistent with the Sages' statement about Chanania, Mishael and Azariah, who willingly entered a fiery furnace in sanctification of Hashem's name: "Had Chanania, Mishael, and Azariah been given lashes, they would have worshipped the graven image" (*Kesubos* 33b). In other words, severe torment is a greater test of faith than a martyr's death that only lasts an instant. Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon wanted to be spared that fate.

Faith for the generations

Rebbi Chanina ben Teradyon defied the Romans by openly teaching Torah to his students, ignoring their edict prohibiting Torah study. The Romans arrested and then subjected him to a public tortured slow death, wishing to show the Jews the consequences for disobedience. In the end, the Romans did not break Rebbi Chanina's spirit. Instead, it was Rebbi Chanina in his martyrdom who prevailed. This Jewish hero, through his sacrifice and act of *Kiddush Hashem*, profoundly affected and inspired those around him and countless others in

future generations. Remarkably, this *tzaddik's* great spiritual presence even sparked a transformation in his Roman executioner who unexpectedly turned from and repented his wicked acts and suddenly desired to enter the World to Come.

The placement of the *tefillah* of the ten martyrs on *Yom Kippur* at the end of reenactment of the priestly *avodah* service is most fitting because the *avodah* service is considered one of the holiest parts of the *Yom Kippur* service. The most moving martyrs' *tefillah* is a parallel to the binding of Yitzchak - *Akeidas Yitzchak* by our founding forefather Avraham, a theme which is also prominently featured in the *Yom Kippur* liturgy.

We will soon encounter the forefather who is most famous for forging the path of faith and *emunah* for the Jewish people. In *Sefer Bereishis*, Avraham's unwavering faith and *emunah* in Hashem and the ten tests of faith he achieved establish the foundation of faith and resilience for his children, the Jewish people.

Rebbi Chanina's story and that of the other ten martyrs remain a testament to the unbreakable spirit and faith of the Jewish people. We are a nation of steadfast faith in Hashem which sustains us through trials and tribulations, persecutions, and attacks throughout the generations. This unbreakable faith is the bedrock of our resilience.



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