

BH

Accepting the Awful: Lessons from King Josiah's Death

8 August, 1997

Dear Friends,

Greetings. How do we accept the unacceptable? How do we cope with the death of righteous persons, especially when the event is unexpected? Our passage, and this week's healing passage, show us how easily something intended for life can turn out to be an agent of death. While these are serious issues, I hope you enjoy this study and that it helps you live life.

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Bavli Taanit 22a-22b, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 107-109:

"For the sword [the alarm is sounded]". Our Rabbis taught: "[Regarding] the sword of which they spoke, it is not necessary to mention a sword that is not of peace but even a sword of peace.

For you do not have a sword more peaceful than [that of] Pharaoh Necho and even so King Josiah came to grief on account of it, as it is said, "And he sent messengers to him, saying: What have I to do with you, King of Judah? Not against you do I come this day but against the house with which I am at war; and God commanded me to make haste; Forbear from interfering with God, who is with me, so that he will not destroy you. (II Chronicles 35:20-22)"

What is [meant by] "God who is with me"? Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: This [means] idols. [Josiah] said: "Since he trusts in idolatry, I can [defeat] him." "And the archers shot at King Josiah and the king said to his servants. Move me away for I am very seriously wounded. (II Chronicles 35:23)"

What is [meant by] "for I am very seriously wounded"? Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: This teaches that they made his entire body like a sieve.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Why was Josiah punished? Because he should have consulted with Jeremiah, but he did not consult [with him].

What did he expound? "[And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid; and I will remove evil beasts from the land.] And a sword shall not go through your land. (Leviticus 26:6)" What is [meant by] "a sword"? If we say: A sword that is not of peace but surely it is written: "And I will give peace in the land [which must mean swords of war will not appear in the land]."! Rather, even [a sword] of peace. But he [Josiah] did not know that his generation did not appear worthy [of receiving these blessings mentioned in Leviticus].

When [Josiah] was dying, Jeremiah saw that his lips were moving [and] said: “Perhaps, God forbid, he is saying something improper on account of his pain.” He bent over and heard [Josiah] justifying the judgment on himself, saying: “The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against His word. (Lamentations 1:18)” [Jeremiah] began [his tribute] over him at that hour: “The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord [was trapped in their pits. (Lamentations 4:20)]”

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Background

King Josiah

King Josiah reigned over Judah 640-609 B.C.E. and was one of her greatest kings. He expanded Judah’s territory. More importantly, he centralized worship in Jerusalem and closed down local altars in outlying towns which had become polluted by idolatry. He purged the cult in Jerusalem, as well, of syncretistic influences. If any king deserved a long life and an honorable death, it was Josiah.

Josiah’s death at the hands of Necho, the Egyptian ruler who was merely passing through Judah on his way to conquer territories north of Josiah’s kingdom, was a horrible event in Jewish history with which the sages struggle in their attempt to justify it and give it meaning.

Josiah’s life and death are linked to our mishnah because they explain how an army may invade Israel without the intention of making war, as did Necho, and yet still cause horrible consequences. For this reason, the presence of any army, overtly hostile or not, is cause to sound the alarm, just as for a drought. In addition, there is another thematic link with our mishnah and with the theme of this tractate. Just as Josiah was a righteous king and yet suffered, a town may do just about everything right and still suffer from drought, wild beasts, plagues and so forth.

Discussion Questions

1. Josiah thought he could beat Necho because Necho believed in idols. Josiah had spent his entire reign purging idolatry from Judah’s worship. How might this have blinded Josiah from seeing what might happen if he attacked Necho? How might we apply this lesson today, regarding ethnocentrism? Or to put it another way, how can our greatest strengths be related to our greatest weaknesses? How can we guard against turning our strengths into weaknesses?
2. Josiah is able to keep faith with God in his dying moments. This is called *tsidduk hadin*, the justification of (God’s) judgment. How might we use this concept today in a way that helps a person come to terms with their life’s actions in the process of dying?

Healing Passage: Potion or Poison?

It was taught: Rabbi Ben'aah used to say: Whoever occupies himself with Torah for its own sake, the Torah becomes an elixir of life for him, as it is said: It is a tree of life to those who hold on to it. (Proverbs 3:8)” And it [also] says: It will be a healing for your navel (Proverbs 3:8)”. And it [also] says: For he who finds Me finds life (Proverbs 8:35).” But whoever occupies himself with Torah not for its own sake, his Torah becomes a deadly poison for him. (B. Taanit 7a, Steinsaltz Volume 13, p. 79)

Background

Torah, in this passage from Taanit (a beautiful one!) is likened to all sorts of things: fire, water, iron, trees and, here, medicine. These things are generally blessings but they can all be curses if used improperly.

Discussion Question

1. How does Torah study heal you? Have you ever used Torah study or prayer to help you feel better when you are sick? How? What was the outcome?
2. What might Torah study “not for its own sake” be? How could that poison a person? How might you turn medicine (e.g., what a physician gives you) into poison? What would the lesson about Torah study, here, have to say on that issue?
3. How does doing *anything* for its own sake bring healing? How does an exploitative attitude poison a person’s life?

Holiday Passage: Avoid Av!

“When Av comes in, we reduce rejoicing, etc.” Rav Yehudah the son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat said in the name of Rav: Just as when Av comes in we reduce rejoicing, so too when Adar comes in we increase rejoicing. Rav Pappa said: Therefore a Jew who has litigation with a non-Jew should avoid him during Av, when his luck is bad, and he should present himself in Adar, when his luck is good.(B. Taanit 29a-b, Steinsaltz Volume 14, p. 208)

Background

The month of Av, especially from the first through the fast on the ninth, are considered dark days in the Jewish calendar. Many people do not eat meat on these days in preparation for the fast on Tisha B’Av. So many bad things have happened to the Jewish people in this month, and on this date (see previous passages about Av), that it is considered a time of bad luck.

Similarly, Adar is considered a time, each year, of good luck since we were saved on Purim in that month.

Therefore, the Gemara suggests that a person avoid litigation with a non-Jew in Av, or at least in the first nine days of that month, so that this perennial bad luck with the non-Jewish world at this season not affect this individual’s luck in court. Similarly, Jews are encouraged to schedule their litigation with non-Jews in Adar since this is deemed a propitious time to conduct such affairs.

Discussion Question

1. This passage hinges on the idea that Jewish history is cyclical: repeating itself at different points throughout the year. Have you ever experienced this sort of sympathetic response to Jewish history in your private life? What happened?
2. What is your response to the practical suggestion of this passage? Should you allow the Jewish calendar, and the holidays, to affect how you schedule your affairs? How might this make your observance of the holidays deeper?