

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

NON-JEWS IN THE SYNAGOGUE/TEMPLE: SOME HANNUKKAH TEXTS

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Most of us know this famous story about Hannukkah found in the Talmud and retold countless times in other forms:

What is Hanukkah? Our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev begin the eight days of Hannukkah....For when the Greeks [whose king was Antiochus] entered the Temple they made all the oil in the Temple impure. And when the House of the Hasmoneans became strong and triumphed over the Greeks, they checked and found only one cruse of oil that still had the seal of the high priest on it. And it contained only [enough oil] to [shed] light for one day. With that cruse of oil a miracle was performed for they lit lights from it for eight days. The next year they set these as days as holidays to be celebrated with the recitation of Hallel and thanksgiving. (B. Shabbat 21b)

That's the story of Hannukkah: the evil non-Jewish king disrespectfully ruins the Temple until it's saved by a band of zealous Jews.

OK. That's one story. But here we have a much more beautiful story of a non-Jewish king in a synagogue:

Once, when King Agrippas read the Torah during services he took it and read it while standing up [even though the king is allowed to read it sitting down] and the sages praised him for it.

When he came to the verse, "You shall not put a foreigner over you (Deuteronomy 17:15)"his eyes streamed with tears [when he realized he could not be a king for them].

They said to him: Fear not, Agrippas! You are our brother! You are our brother! You are our brother! (Al tira, achinu atah, achinu atah, achinu atah!). (M. Sotah 7:8)

Here we have a non-Jewish king reading Torah and who is so beloved by the congregation that they call him "our brother"!

Discussion Questions:

1. Contrast the stories about Antiochus and Agrippas. Why is one king reviled while the other is beloved? How can we use these two kings as templates for roles of the non-Jew in the synagogue today?
2. The Mishnah rarely uses so many words in such a lyrical form. How could we use this beautiful phrase: "Al tira, achinu atah, achinu atah, achinu atah!" in our liturgy today?

Happy Hannukkah!