

The Roman conquerors were not content to savor their victory. One by one they passed decrees, banning once and for all this strange religion and hoping to lure the hearts of its adherents away from its laws.

The door echoed with the muted cries of a woman in labor. Minutes later another sound followed. It was the wail of a newborn child — plaintive, yet defiant.

Outside the door of the room a crowd had gathered, awaiting the announcement.

Eyes that were not on the door looked instead upon the grand visage of the father, who had a retinue of adolescents and adults around him, as befitted a man of his stature.

The door opened, revealing the midwife. Her brown eyes were dazed, as if she, and not the man's spouse, had just brought a new Jewish life into the world. She smiled, but it was a smile tinged with sadness.

"Rabban Shimon," she announced, "it is a boy."

The husband nodded. Around him congratulations floated weakly,

and some of the students looked away. Others scrutinized the man's

"A son!" he exclaimed. "A new soul to enter our Covenant!"

At this final word one of the men whispered, "Do you believe he'll actually go through with it?"

"He shall, if ever I know Shimon ben Gamliel," answered another.

Those of us acquainted with history might know too well of this mournful era in which Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, leader, or Nasi, of the Sanhedrin, reigned. A century had passed since the destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem, and a number of years had gone by since the bitter Bar Kochba revolt. After the final defeat, it was said that the peasants could fertilize their fields with the blood that poured out of Jewish bodies like water from an unplugged cistern.

But the Roman conquerors were not content to savor their victory. One by one they passed decrees, banning once and for all

THE LAW

By DEVORAN KIRSCH

face—a face still young, but bearing the creases of a stressful life. It was identifiably noble. Now it beamed.

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this strange religion and hoping to lure the hearts of its adherents away from its laws.

Now, to eradicate any final difference between the Jews and the gentiles, the Romans enacted a new, cruel decree, which was brutally enforced: the prohibition against *bris milah*. This practice, which for over two millennia had bound a Jew to his Creator, was now punishable by death, and those who dared to transgress knew what lay in store.

But on this particular day, the proud new father paraded through the hall in whose adjacent room his wife had just given birth.

"Gentlemen!" he declared. "Eight days from now, you shall join me in the festivities."

A student gasped. "Is not His Excellency aware of the warning?"

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel turned to him in contempt. "Do you mean to tell me that you are afraid of mere mortals? After all that I have taught you, you still don't know where our allegiance lies. G-d commanded us to circumcise our sons. Even should an evil king decree otherwise, whom do we follow?"

Nervously the others agreed. The Nasi continued, "The laws of our Torah are immutable and unbreakable. I would not even consider deferring to any pagan ways, for to obliterate our own life style is spiritual suicide. A Jew lives by his faith."

With the air of a mighty king he followed the midwife into the private room. The others retreated grimly, while the student who had spoken listened by the window for the sound of Roman footsteps.

The governor yawned, while the attendant came before him, stammering.

"The Jew, sir, is here."

"Bring him in."

The governor reached for his goblet. The fading Jerusalem sky had transformed his chamber into a murky gray and reminded him that he was due for a good long nap. It had been an exhausting day; he had already tried three Jews for breaching various ordinances. After he disposed of this case, he would have the rest of those who had been arrested thrown in jail for the night; their judgment could wait until morning.

Now, to eradicate any final difference between the Jews and the gentiles, the Romans enacted a new, cruel decree, which was brutally enforced: the prohibition against *bris milah*.

The criminal entered, followed by the attendant.

"What is his offense?" asked the governor.

"A circumcision, sir."

The governor's eyes widened. At once he recognized the face.

"Why, Shimon ben Gamliel," the Roman exclaimed. "This is most unfortunate. You, of all people. I might have expected you to set an example."

"Your Excellency, I have set an example," the Nasi retorted. "My countrymen know well under which authority to submit. There is a law, sir, higher than yours, which I cannot

go against."

"But you do not fear the sword?"

"Sir, such an act would only terminate my life in this world. I will do nothing to forfeit my reward in the World to Come."

The governor sighed. Such eloquence, he marveled. And from such a personage. A man like Shimon ben Gamliel could not be found in Rome. The empire was at its zenith of glory, but it was a glory based on force, not the righteousness of a divine power. The governor understood very well the sham that was called "power" by the Romans. Just as easily as it was gained, so might it be taken away.

The governor put down his goblet. He stole another glance at the Jewish leader, who waited calmly, as if he were taking a stroll on his Sabbath. That too had been outlawed. How many had been put to death for flouting the orders?

And now here was their leader, awaiting a similar outcome. How much the governor admired the likes of Shimon ben Gamliel and his unshakable faith. This was a man who clung to law — his law, the law of his father and grandfather, and a Heavenly Father who had ordained it.

But alas, the governor thought, he had his own law to obey. And were the emperor to know that he harbored such sympathies, the governor might pay with his life.

He cleared his throat. "Shimon ben Gamliel," he began, "in the eyes of the Roman Empire you have disobeyed the law, and thus become liable for most severe consequences. However, I am tempted to set you free, due to your position."

"Sir, were G-d kind enough to

favor me with ten sons, I would transgress your law ten times," replied the Nasi.

"You make it difficult, then, to apply mercy."

"In that case, what shall be done?"

"I cannot decide," said the governor, shaking his head. "I shall have no choice but to send you to the Caesar himself, with your wife and child. Caesar made the law; Caesar shall decide your fate. And," he added sorrowfully, "let the punishment fit the crime."

The Jaffa road whirled with cloud dust brought on by the travelers. There were five of them — four, technically, since one did not walk himself. Instead, he lay curled between his mother's arms. Behind her and her husband the soldiers' horses trotted, their riders bearing sharpened lances, for these men were guards, assigned to share this trek to Rome, where judgment waited.

The baby, the source of the crime, whimpered, while the mother hugged him closer and shivered in the cool of the sinking sun.

"It is late," she whispered. "We have walked all day. We must rest."

"For the night

only," snapped a guard. "Tomorrow we must continue."



The Romans enacted a new, cruel decree.

She glanced at the desert. Where Jewish children once sang, the hills were an empty brown and wolves howled. She had gone this way before, on more pleasant journeys, and her gentle eyes scrutinized the distance.

"I know of a place nearby," she said. "A villa, owned by a friend. Perhaps she will oblige."

An hour later they came across a large building, which was a cheerful white even in the fading day. After a servant ran inside, a couple emerged. The woman ran to her Jewish friend.

Her husband, wearing the robes of a Roman official, greeted Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. "This is a wonderful surprise. I look forward to another discourse, and your wisdom." He paled at the sight of the guards. "Who are they?"

"Our escort," answered the Nasi ironically, while following his patrician friend inside.

The women were already there. While a servant offered refreshment, the Roman matron played with the infant.

"A darling boy," she said. "So much like my own."

"Why, you have a son?" Shimon's wife exclaimed. "That is certainly good news."

"Oh, yes," answered the woman happily. "Antoninus. A week old, in fact."

"The same age, then, as my Yehuda."

Frowning, the woman handed back the child. "But I do not understand. Why do you travel this far with a newborn? And why—" she waved her hand toward the soldiers, slouching near the veranda and helping themselves to wine "—with them?"

The Jewish wife sighed. "It is a

dreadful story." Sadly she related the events, and ended by pointing to her son. "So I am afraid that little Yehuda, in spite of the joy his birth has caused us, has also brought on great pain. For our refusal to deviate from our faith, his father and I must go to Rome and present him to Caesar himself. Everyone's life hangs upon my son."

"Your life," the woman repeated. She rose and gazed sympathetically at her Jewish friend, whose maternal arms caressed the sleeping boy. "For the courage you have shown in defending your faith, I am sure you

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shall be rewarded. To be willing to sacrifice your child—" She shook her head tearfully. "The utter cruelty of it. The laws of the land are harsh. They are certainly undeserved."

Then she brightened. "But perhaps you shall not have to make that sacrifice. Suppose—" she glanced furtively at the soldiers, now flushed and drunk "—suppose you and I were to . . . make a slight exchange?"

"An exchange?" asked the wife.

Instantly the woman clapped her hands and a handmaiden appeared. The woman mumbled a few words, which Rabban Shimon's wife could not hear, and the handmaiden disappeared, only to

reappear quickly with something in her arms.

"My boy," answered the woman simply. "Eight days old . . . and uncircumcised. Perhaps you might like to borrow him?"

Comprehending, the Jewish wife agreed, and began to cry tears of joy. "I shall treat your son as my own."

The pavement widened, until it finally curved and split into numerous Roman alleys. Shimon ben Gamliel and his wife trudged through the congestion, ignoring the curious stares as well as the cavalry which jabbed them with spears.

"Get a move on!" shouted one of the guards. He brushed the sweat off his face, happily downing his flask of water and anticipating the imperial reception — and a possible promotion. He and his friend might even compete for the honor of severing this Jew's scholarly head.

He steered the hapless pair past the Colosseum, site of the infamous "arena," where human beings called gladiators were forced to do battle with ferocious, hungry lions. The guard began to wonder if, perhaps, the couple might be saved for the arena instead of being dispatched quickly by the executioner. He relished the thought of watching this wicked Jew being torn apart by beasts.

When they approached the palace, the other guard exchanged words with the sentry. Trumpets blared, and the group from Palestine slowly ascended the marble steps.

In his throne room, the Caesar waited. The garland leaves over his

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The Law

(Continued from page 6)

forehead trembled while he glared at his audience, and around him senators waited, rock still. Standing, Shimon ben Gamliel and his wife bowed their heads. The Nasi then raised his own with aristocratic grace.

The emperor frowned. "What brings these wretched people here?"

"Caesar," began one of the guards, "this Jew and his wife have flagrantly violated your decree against circumcision. They have been brought here, on the governor's orders, to await your imperial judgment. Behold!" He seized the infant, which began to cry in his rough bands.

He raised it triumphantly and placed it on the cold floor, near the emperor's feet.

The emperor knelt and slowly unfolded the diaper.

Then he jerked his head. "A lie!"

"A lie?" gasped the guard.

"Why, this child isn't circumcised. A blind man can plainly see!" He held up the child, then quickly covered it with the diaper. "You have made a mockery of me!"

The guard reeled and glanced at his companion in despair and helplessness. "Caesar . . . we could swear . . ."

"Before we left, Caesar, we saw the boy," gabbled the companion. "He was as circumcised as any of his race."

Suddenly an older senator hobbled forward. In a wavering voice he declared, "Caesar, the guards speak

the truth."

The emperor spun around sharply. "How do you know?"

"Simple," answered the senator. "I am quite familiar with this sect and their practices. I also know of their deity. It is a great one, indeed, Caesar. Their G-d loves His people, and rescues them in their darkest hour." Wisely he added, "Their Torah states, 'Who is a great nation, that their G-d is close to them when they call.' Obviously they prayed to Him, and He answered with a miracle."

"Amazing," whispered the emperor. He looked again at the couple; the wife was clutching the uncircumcised child like a precious gift. "If this deity could perform such an act, then how much more so might He bring down vengeance on those who oppose Him?"

He raised his hand and summoned the Nasi forward. "Surely, Shimon ben Gamliel, your G-d must be great if you are willing to uphold His law at whatever cost. For that reason, I shall nullify my own law, for His is far greater than mine."

He rose and announced, "Henceforth, the decrees against the Jewish people are null and void. They are free to practice their faith."

The couple thanked the emperor profusely, while the wife, in particular, showered him with blessings. How else would a mother react?

"Wonderful!" breathed the uncircumcised child's mother. "I am so grateful."

Rabban Shimon's wife joyfully

handed back the infant. "This little baby not only saved my life — mine and my husband's — but my entire people." She scooped up Yehuda and cradled him.

The other woman kissed her Antoninus, who drifted into sleep once he was back in familiar arms.

"A miracle," she declared. "Your G-d is definitely a powerful G-d, if in the merit of a child who was not even Jewish He wrought such good fortune. May it be the Heavenly will that your son and mine remain good friends forever."

"Amen," responded Rabban Shimon's wife. "I am sure that G-d shall heed your words."

□

Indeed, they were not said in vain. When the two children grew, one became Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, or Rabbeinu HaKaddosh, the compiler of the Mishnah; the other became Antoninus, Emperor of Rome. These two men remained the closest of companions. The new Caesar not only bestowed active kindness toward the Jews during his reign, but demonstrated active interest, as well. Secretly he studied Judaism, until at last he himself converted, and continued his learning under — who else? — his friend Yehuda HaNasi.

As the Sages say: "In the merit of the milk Antoninus had suckled on the way to Rome while passing for the infant Yehuda, Antoninus merited to study Torah, enter the wings of the Divine Presence, and join the people of Israel!" JR



He held up the child, then quickly covered it with the diaper. "You have made a mockery of me!"

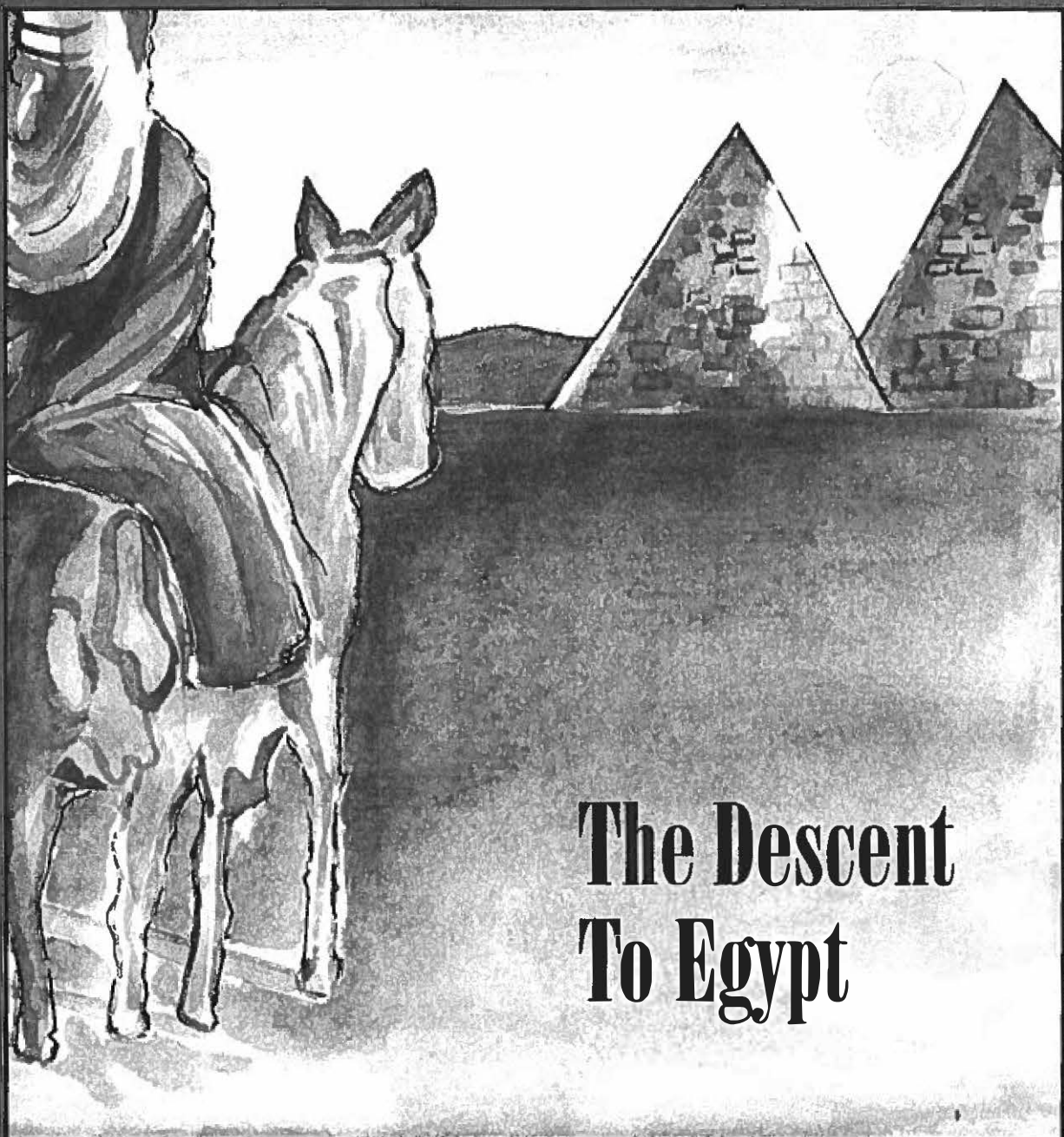
The Jewish Reader

\$1.75

Teves 5751

Vol. 3 No. 4

December 1990



The Descent To Egypt

TO OUR READERS

Hashem told Avraham Avinu that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land for four hundred years. We are taught that the four hundred years began with the birth of Yitzchak, but the main period of suffering was in Egypt. The descent by Yaakov Avinu to Egypt is the subject of this month's cover, and of "Torah Highlights."

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews revolted on several occasions against the Roman occupiers. The greatest revolt was that of Bar Kochba, but even that was doomed to defeat. In this month and next month's "Our Story," the sad history of that time period — including the military defeat of Bar Kochba and the subsequent religious persecution of the Jews by the Emperor Hadrian — is related. The Romans prohibited the practice of Judaism, but some great men and women would not be deterred from serving G-d. "The Law" is the dramatization of an episode that demonstrated this faith — the circumcision by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel of his son Yehuda.

One of the great Sephardic leaders of the nineteenth century was Yaakov Abuchazera, who passed away in Teves of 1880. "A Little Town Amidst Giants" is a story about Rabbi Yaakov and his grandson, Rabbi Yisrael, popularly known as the Baba Sali.

And due to popular demand, the Torah Quiz, with a \$50 dollar prize, is back. Get your thinking caps on, and let us hear from you!

This Publication
is made possible
by a grant from
the educational division
of the



Laboratories

MAIL ROOM

I enjoyed "Torah Highlights" in the current issue (Cheshvan) very much. It was interesting to find out different things about the Aleph-bais, since we are not really taught this in our school.

I also liked the story about the immigrants who had to walk through a bad neighborhood in order to be taught by their rebbe ("A Challenge for Angels"). For kids like me it's very easy to walk or ride to yeshiva. We don't have to worry about getting beaten up with every step we take. I

was shocked to find out that there was a time when this was not true in America. My compliments to the author of the story.

Moshe Katz, Brooklyn, NY

I really enjoy "Our Wonderful World" and "News In Review." These two sections help keep us informed about events that are happening in the world and about science. Please keep up the good work.

Miriam Goldberger
Miami Beach, FL

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Send to: The Jewish Reader, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230.

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THE JEWISH READER

(ISSN1049-1538) is published monthly, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Second-class postage paid at Brooklyn, N.Y.

Subscriptions: 1 year 10 issues \$12.50, Foreign \$US15.50

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JEWISH READER, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230.

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All requests, subscriptions, and manuscripts should be addressed to: The Jewish Reader, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718)692-3900

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