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A Look at Martyrdom

Maimonides: The Fundamental Values of Torah

Chapter 5:1–3

(1) רמב"ם יד החזקה - הלכות יסודי התורה פרק ה
(א) כל בית ישראל מצווין על קדוש השם הגדול הזה שנאמר ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל ומוזהרין שלא לחללו שנאמר ולא תחללו את שם קדשי כיצד כשיעמוד עובד כוכבים ויאנוס את ישראל לעבור על אחת מכל מצות האמורות בתורה או יהרגו יעבור ואל יהרג שנאמר במצות אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם ואם מת ולא עבר הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו:
(ב) במה דברים אמורים בשאר מצות חוץ מעבודת כוכבים וגלוי עריות ושפיכת דמים אבל שלש עבירות אלו אם יאמר לו עבור על אחת מהן או תהרג יהרג ואל יעבור במה דברים אמורים בזמן שהעובד כוכבים מתכוין להנאת עצמו כגון שאנסו לבנות לו ביתו בשבת או לבשל לו תבשילו או אנס אשה לבועלה וכיוצא בזה אבל אם נתכוין להעבירו על המצות בלבד אם היה בינו לבין עצמו ואין שם עשרה מישראל יעבור ואל יהרג ואם אנסו להעבירו בעשרה מישראל יהרג ואל יעבור ואפילו לא נתכוין להעבירו אלא על מצוה משאר מצות בלבד:
(ג) וכל הדברים האלו שלא בשעת הגזרה אבל בשעת הגזרה והוא שיעמוד מלך רשע כנבוכדנצר וחביריו ויגזרו גזרה על ישראל לבטל דתם או מצוה מן המצות יהרג ואל יעבור אפילו על אחת משאר מצות בין נאנס בתוך עשרה בין נאנס בינו לבין עובדי כוכבים:

1) Every house of Israel is commanded to sanctify the great Name, as it is written: And I should be sanctified among the house of Israel. (Leviticus 22:32) And we are enjoined not to profane It, as it is written: ...and do not profane My Holy Name (Ibid.) How would this happen? If an idolater would force a Jew to face transgressing one commandment from the Torah or he would be executed. He should transgress the commandment and not be killed, as it is written about the commandments: ...that you should fulfill the commandments *and live by them*. (Ibid 18:5) It means one should live rather than die for them. If one chose to die and not transgress this commandment, he is guilty of a capital crime.

2) To which commandments does this refer? It refers to all commandments except for: the prohibitions against idolatry, sexual prohibitions, and murder. These commandments, however, if one said transgress or be executed, one should choose to die rather than transgress them. In which cases would this happen? In cases where the idolater is motivated by his own personal pleasure i.e. he forced a Jew to build his house on

Shabbat, or to cook him something, or he forced a woman to have sex with him and similar things. However, if his intent was to make you transgress for the purpose of just making you sin—if it was just between the two of you—you should still transgress rather than be killed, but if it were in front of a quorum of ten Jews, he should be killed rather than sin—even if it was one of the other [less serious] commandments (i.e. not idolatry. Sexual practices, or murder).

3) All of these instances are speaking at a time when the performance of Commandments have not been prohibited by foreign decree, but in times where a foreign decree against the commandments is in tact, and this means when an evil King like Nebuchadnezer (Babylonian King that destroyed the first Temple) and his minions and decree that Israel should give up their faith or even one commandment from the commandments, he should be killed rather than transgress even one of the other commandments—irrespective of whether it is in front of ten or whether it is only between the idolater and the Jew.

YOUR MAIMONIDES NAVIGATOR

1. What is the difference between sinning privately and sinning in front of ten (in public)?
2. Why is it considered worse to sin in public?
3. Why, in times where religious practice is illegal does this distinction matter less to Maimonides?
4. Consider the tension between the commandment “and you shall live by them...” and the requirement to give your life rather than worship idols. When is martyrdom necessary according to Maimonides and, more important, why?

The stories that follow describe the execution of one of our sages during a time when Jewish practices were against the law. See if this story fits into the criteria as Maimonides has laid them out:

Two Stories of Rabbi Hanina Ben Tradyon

Talmud, Avoda Zara 17b

(ג) שם תנו רבנן, כשנתפסו רבי אליעזר בן פרטא ורבי חנינא בן תרדיון. (למינות) אמר ליה רבי אליעזר בן פרטא לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון, אשריך רבי חנינא שנתפסת על דבר אחד, אוי לי שנתפסתי על חמישה דברים. אמר ליה רבי חנינא בן תרדיון, אשריך שנתפסת על חמישה דברים - ואתה ניצול, אוי לי שנתפסתי על דבר אחד - ואיני ניצול. שאתה עסקת בתורה ובגמילות חסדים, ואני ל' א עסקתי אלא בתורה בלבד. וכדרב הונא, דאמר רב הונא, כל העוסק בתורה בלבד, דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה, שנאמר, (דה"ב טו) "ונמים רבים לישראל ל' א אל' הי אמת, ול' א כ' הן מורה, ול' א תורה". מאי "ל' א אל' הי אמת"? (אמר רב הונא,) כל העוסק בתורה בלבד, דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה. ובגמילות חסדים ל' א עסק? והתנא, רבי אליעזר בן יעקב ב' אומר, אל יתן אדם מעותיו לארנקי של צדקה, אלא אם כן ממונה עליו תלמיד חכם כרבי חנינא בן תרדיון - הימוני מהימן, מיעבד לא עבד. והתנא, אמר ליה, (רבי) מעות של פורים נתחלפו לי במעות של צדקה, וחלקתים לעניים. מיעבד עבד, כדבעי ליה לא עבד: שם אתויה לרבי אליעזר בן פרטא, אמרו ליה, מאי טעמא תנית? ומאי טעמא גנבת? אמר להו, אי סיפא - לא ספרא, ואי ספרא - לא סיפא. מדהא לא איתא, הא נמי ל' א איתא. ומאי טעמא קרו לך "רבי"? רבן

שֶׁל טַרְסָנִים אָנִי. אֵינִיתוּ לִי תְּרֵי קִיבוּרֵי, אָמְרוּ לִי, הִי דִשְׁתַּנָּא וְהִי דְעֶרְבָא? אִתְרַחֵישׁ לִי נִיסָא, אֲתֵנָא זִיבוּרָא וְיִתִיב עַל דְעֶרְבָא, וְאֲתֵנָא זִיבוּרָתָא וְיִתִיב עַל דִשְׁתַּנָּא. אָמַר לְהוּ, הָא דִשְׁתַּנָּא, וְהָא דְעֶרְבָא. וּמֵאֵי טַעְמָא לֹא אֲתִית לְפִי אֲבִידָן? [אָמַר לְהוּ,] זָקוּן אָנִי, וּמִתְיָרָא אָנִי שְׂמָא תְרַמְסוּנִי בְרַגְלֵיכֶם. אָמְרוּ, וְעַד הָאִידְנָא פְּמָה סְבִי אַרְמוּס? אִיתְרַחֵישׁ נִיסָא וְאַרְמָס חַד סְבָא בְּהָהוּא יוֹמָא. וּמֵאֵי טַעְמָא [קָא] שְׂבָקָת עֲבָדָךְ לְחִירוֹת? אָמַר לְהוּ, ל' אֵי הִיוּ דְבָרִים מְעוּלָם. קָם חַד מִיַּנְיָהוּ לְאַסְהוּדֵי בֵיה, אֲתָא אֵלֵיהוּ אִידְמֵי לִי בְּחַד מַחְשִׁיבֵי דְמִלְכוּתָא, אָמַר לִי, שְׂבָקוּהָ, מְדַאִיתְרַחֵישׁ לִי נִיסָא בְּכוּלְהוּ, בְּהָא נְמִי מִיתְרַחֵישׁ לִי נִיסָא. וְהָהוּא גְבָרָא בִישׁוּתִיָּהּ הוּא דְקָא מְחִנִי, וְל' אֵ אֲשַׁגַּח בֵּיה. קָם לְמִימַר לְהוּ, הֲנָה כְּתִיבָא אִיגְרָתָא דְהָנָה כְּתִיב מַחְשִׁיבֵי דְרוּמָאֵי לְשִׁדְרֵי לְקִיסָר, וְשִׁדְרוּהָ בְּיַדֵּיהָ דְהָהוּא גְבָרָא. אֲתָא אֵלֵיהוּ פְתָקִיָּה אַרְבַּע מֵאָה פְרָסִי, אֲזַל וְל' אֲתָא:

אֲתִיּוּהָ לְרַבֵּי חֲנִינָא בְּן תְּרַדְיוֹן. אָמְרוּ לִי, (מֵאֵי טַעְמָא) [אֲמַאי] קָא עֲסַקְתָּ בְּתוֹרָה? אָמַר לְהוּ, כְּאֲשֶׁר צִנְנִי ה' אֵלֵי. מִדְּגָזְרוּ עָלַי לְשׁוֹרִיפָה, וְעַל אֲשֶׁתוֹ לְהַרְיָגָה, וְעַל בְּתוֹ לִישָׁב בְּקוּבָה שְׁל זִוְנוֹת.

*Narrator: The Sages taught:
When Rabbi Eliezer Ben Parta and Rabbi Hanina Ben tradyon were caught [for heresy against the Roman Empire]. Rabbi Eliezer Ben Parta said to Rabbi Hanina Ben Tradyon:*

Rabbi Eliezer Ben Parta: You're lucky Rabbi Hanina, you were only charged with one offense, but poor me, I have five charges against me.

Hanina answered: You're the lucky one! For even though you have five charges against you, you will be saved in the end, but my one charge will be enough to make sure that I will not be saved—because you have studied Torah and engaged in acts of lovingkindness, and I have only learned Torah.

Narrator: Just as Rav Huna once said: Anyone who engages exclusively in Torah study is like someone who has no God. As it is written: Israel has gone many days without the true God, without a Priest to give instruction and without Teaching.”(II Chronicles 15:3) What does “without the true God” mean? Rav Huna would say, Anyone who engages exclusively in Torah study is like someone who has no God.

Is it really true that Rabbi Hanina did not engage in acts of lovingkindness? Is it not taught?

Rabbi Eliezer Ben Ya'akov said: One should not give his money to a charity fund, unless the one responsible for it is a learned sage like Rabbi Hanina Ben Tradyon.

He was certainly trustworthy and capable, but he never actually did it.

Are you sure he never did it? Behold it is taught: Rabbi Hanina once said:

My Purim coins got mixed up with the money I had already designated for charity, so I distributed all of the money to the poor.

So, he did engage in acts of lovingkindness, but when they asked him to be responsible for the fund, he declined.

The Romans brought Rabbi Eliezer Ben Parta to court.

They [the Romans] asked him: Why are you either a Torah scholar, or a thief (since both have the custom of eating in the late afternoon)?

He answered: If I was a thief, I wouldn't be a scholar, and if I was a scholar I wouldn't be a thief—so I'm neither.

They asked: Why then, do they call you Rebbe?

He answered: I'm a teacher of weavers.

They brought in a loom.

They asked: Which is the warp and which is the woof?

A miracle happened and a male wasp fell on the woof, and a female wasp fell on the warp¹.

He answered: That one [with the male wasp] is the woof and that one [with the female wasp] is the warp.

They asked: Why is it that we never see you at our pagan meeting places?

He answered: I am old and frail and I'm afraid I'll be trampled to death from the feet of the revelers.

They retorted: How many old people have been trampled up until this time?

A miracle occurred and someone announced that an old man had been trampled that very day.

They asked: Why did you let your slave go free?

He answered: This never happened.

One of the Romans arose to testify against Rabbi Eliezer, and Elijah the Prophet appeared in the guise of a Roman noble, and he said to the Roman:

Leave him! Since so many miracles have worked for him, let him have another.

This Roman was of wicked temperament and paid no heed to Elijah. As he got up to bear witness against Rebbe Eliezer a letter which needed to be delivered from one of the Roman nobles to Caesar needed to be delivered and this fellow was selected to deliver it [before he had a chance to testify]. Elijah came and threw him four hundred (Persian) miles...He went and never returned.

They brought Rebbe Hanina Ben Tradyon and said to him: Why have you engaged in Torah Study?

He said to them: Because the Lord my God commanded me to.

They immediately decreed for him to be burned at the stake...

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

1. Why was Rabbi Eliezer Ben Parta saved and why did Rebbe Hanina die?
2. Was Rebbe Hanina's reason for not being saved correct in your opinion, or was there another reason?
3. Why didn't Rebbe Hanina try to save himself like Rebbe Eliezer?

¹ The Aramaic name for woof is *arva*, and the Aramaic name for a male wasp is *zibura*, while the name for the woof is *shTi* while the female name for a wasp is *ziburTa*. From this hint Rabbi Eliezer could determine which was which.

4. According to Mainonides who acted properly?
5. Do you think Rebbe Hanina would have been granted miracles as well?
6. How do you understand Rav Huna's statement "anyone who engages exclusively in Torah study is like someone who has no God"? What do you think of this statement?

Rabbi Hanina Part II

The Parchments Are Burning

Babylonian Talmud: Avoda Zara 18A

תנו רבנן, כשחלה רבי יוסי בן קסמא, הלך רבי חנינא בן תרדיון אצלו לבקרו, אמר ליה, חנינא אחי, אי אתה יודע שאומה זו מן השמים המליכה, שהחריבה את ביתו, ושרפה את היכלו, והרגה את חסידיו, ואיבדה את טוביו, ועדין היא קיימת, ואני שמעתי עליך שאתה יושב ועוסק בתורה, ומקהיל קהילות ברבים, וספר (תורה) מונח [לך] בחיקך. אמר ליה, מן השמים ירחמו. אמר ליה, אני אומר לך דברים של טעם, ואתה אומר [לי], מן השמים ירחמו. תמהני אם ל' א' ישרפו אותך ואת ספר תורה באש. אמר ליה, (ר"ח) [רבי], מה אני לעולם הבא? אמר ליה, כלום בא מעשה לידך? אמר ליה, רבי, מעות של פורים נתחלפו לי במעות של צדקה, וחלקתים לעניים. אמר ליה, אם כן - מחללך יהא חלקי, ומגורלך יהא גורלי. אמרו, ל' א' היו ימים מועטים עד שנפטר רבי יוסי בן קסמא, והלכו כל גדולי רומי לקוברו, והספידוהו הספד גדול, ובחזרתו מצאו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון, שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה, ומקהיל קהילות ברבים, וספר תורה מונח לו בחיקו, הביאוהו וכרכוהו בספר תורה, והקיפוהו בחבילי זמורות, והציתו בהן את האור, והביאו ספוגין של צמר, ושראום במים, והניחום על לבו, כדי של' א' תצא נשמתו מהרה. אמרה לו בתו, אבא, אראך בכך? אמר לה, אלמלא אני נשרפתי לבדי, [היה] קשה הדבר [לי]. ועכשיו שאני נשרף, וספר תורה עמי, מי שייבקש עלבונה של תורה, הוא יבקש עלבוני. אמרו לו תלמידיו, רבי, מה אתה רואה? אמר להן, גוילין נשרפין נאותיותיו פורחות. אף אתה פתח פיך ותכנס בך האש. אמר להם, מוטב שישלנה מי שנתנה, ואל יחבול הוא בעצמו, אמר לו קליסטנירו, רבי, אם אני מרבה עליך בשלהבת, ונוטל ספוגין של צמר מעל לך, אתה מביאני לעולם הבא? אמר ליה, הן. אישתבע לי, אישתבע לו. מיד הרבה עליו בשלהבת ונטל ספוגין של צמר מעל לבו, ויצאתה נשמתו במהרה. אף הוא קפץ ונפל לתוך האור. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה, רבי חנינא בן תרדיון וקליסטנירו מזומנים לחיי העולם הבא. בכה רבי ואמר, יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת, ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים: .

Narrator: In the year 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and took control of the region. This story takes place during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian who squashed the Bar Kochba rebellion and sought to rebuild Jerusalem as a pagan city in his honor. During the infamous Hadrianic persecutions Jews were forbidden to live in Jerusalem, study Torah and observe the commandments. It was during this time that the most prominent Talmudic scholars were publicly executed. Rabbi Chanina Ben Tradyon was one of ten who have been memorialized in High Holiday liturgy.

This is his story:

Narrator: Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion went to visit him. Rabbi Yossi said to him:

Rabbi Yossi: Hanina, my brother, —don't you know that Heaven has ordained this Roman nation to reign? Even though she has laid waste to God's House, burnt His Temple, killed

His pious ones and caused His best ones to perish, she continues to stand! Yet, what is this I hear about you? That even though you know it is forbidden, you are gathering large crowds in public to teach them with a Torah scroll in your lap.

Hanina: Let the heavens have mercy.

Rabbi Yossi: I speak to you words that make sense and you say, let the heavens have mercy? I wouldn't be surprised if they burn both you and your Torah at the stake...

Narrator: It wasn't long before Rabbi Yossi Ben Kisma died and the Romans eulogized him with great fanfare. When they returned from the funeral they found Rabbi Hanina teaching Torah to the multitudes with a Torah scroll in his lap. They tied him together with his Torah and surrounded him with kindling wood. The executioner took sponges of wool and soaked them in water, and placed them on Hanina's heart so he would not die quickly. The executioner lit the fire and Hanina's daughter cried,

Beruriah, Rabbi Hanina's Daughter: Father, is this what you deserve?

Hanina: This might be difficult if I was being burned alone, but the one who would disgrace the Torah may as well disgrace me."

Narrator: His students asked,

Students: Rebbe what do you see?"

Hanina: **The parchments are burning, but the letters are flying free.**

They replied: You too, open your mouth and let the flames take you.

Hanina answered: "Let the one who gave me life take it away and let me not harm myself.

The Executioner then said to him: Rabbi, if I raise the flame and remove the woolen sponges from over your heart, will you bring me to [your] *olam haba* (world to come)?"

Rabbi Hanina replied : Yes.

The Executioner: Swear to me.

Narrator: *Rabbi Hanina swore to him. So, he increased the flames and removed the wool from Hanina's heart and Hanina expired quickly. Then, suddenly, the Executioner himself jumped into the flames and died.*

A bat-kol (voice from Heaven) exclaimed: Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion and the Executioner have been welcomed in the world to come.

[Upon witnessing this] Rebbe wept and said: There are those who earn their world to come in a single moment, and those for whom it takes many years.

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

1. How does this story differ from the previous story—how are they similar?
2. Why is Rebbe Hanina caught in the first story? Why is he caught in the second? Do they contradict or complement each other?
3. What is Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma's opinion about the Roman Empire?
4. Why does Rabbi Hanina go visit him? Why does Rabbi Hanina ignore Rabbi Yossi's advice?
5. What is meant by Rabbi Hanina's words, "**The parchments are burning but the letters are flying free**"?
6. How does the meaning of the statement "**The parchments are burning but the letters are flying free**" change now that you have been given the whole story?
7. Why does Hanina refuse to hasten his own death?

8. Why do his students compare him to the Torah scroll? (they say “**you too** open your mouth...”)
9. How does the Executioner earn his place in *olam haba*?
10. How do you understand the weeping of Rabbi Yehuda the Chief?
11. What do you think this story teaches about the role of oral tradition?
12. Why are they telling us this story? What do they want us to know? History? Values? What is the purpose of this story?
13. Compare the martyrdom of R. Hanina Ben Tradyon to that of the executioner.



The Diameter of the Bomb

Yehuda Amichai

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,
with four dead and eleven wounded.
And around these, in a larger circle
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered
and one graveyard. But the young woman
who was buried in the city she came from,
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,
enlarges the circle considerably,
and the solitary man mourning her death
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea
includes the entire world in the circle.
And I won't even mention the crying of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making
a circle with no end and no God.

Dangerous Country

Yehudah Amichai

Dangerous country. Full of suspect objects
And booby-trapped people. Everything can be
The beginning of a new religion: every birth, death,
Conflagration of thorns in a field, smoke.
Even lovers must be careful in their deeds and words,
Arms stretched for an embrace, whisper at midnight,
Secret crying, a distant gaze, descending a staircase
In a white dress. All those are the beginning of a new
religion.

Even the migrating birds know it,
They come in spring or in autumn and do not stay,
Like the gods of this country that never stay.
And he who says here it was is a prophet of
consolation,
And he who says here it will be is a prophet of rage.

And from north to south, summer joy has no end,
And the warning against deep and stormy waters
And the warning against a drought above ground,
And memorial tombstones everywhere, are weights
To keep the history of the country from flying off
Like papers in the wind.

YOUR AMICHAH NAVIGATOR

1. How does Amichai use traditional ideas in these poems?
2. In the radius of a bomb, how does Amichai “measure” the bomb’s impact?
3. Many Psalms call out asking “Where is God” what is Amichai’s answer?
4. In “a dangerous country” Amichai talks about memorials being used as paperweights...what does he mean?
5. HOW DOES the relationship between memorials and paperweights compare with r. hanina ben tradyon’s statement “the parchments are burning but the letters are flying free?”
6. How does memory stabilize or destabilize a place?
7. What does Amichai mean by “a new religion?”
8. What is the difference between a “Prophet of consolation” and a “Prophet of rage?”

