

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

MARTYRDOM IN THE YERUSHALMI

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At this time of year, as we move toward Tisha B'Av, we think about martyrdom. In this text, we find that circumstances conspire against the Jews and the misinterpretation of Jewish practice leads to martyrdom:

Trajan (c. 117 C.E.), the evil ones, son was born on the ninth of Av and the Jews were fasting. His daughter died on Hannukkah and the Jews lit candles.

His wife sent a message to him, saying: Instead of going out to conquer the Barbarians, come and conquer the Jews who have rebelled against you.

He thought it would take ten days, but he came in five. He came and found the Jews occupied in study of the Torah, with the following verse, "The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you do not understand. (Deuteronomy 28:49)"

He said to them: With what text of Scripture are you occupied?

They said to him: They recited the verse, above.

He said: This refers to me. I thought I'd arrive in 10 days and arrived in 5 [i.e., I came here swiftly, as predicted in the text from Deuteronomy which you are currently studying].

His legions surrounded them and killed them.

He said to the women: Obey my legions and I shall not kill you. They said to him: As you did to those on the ground, do to us who are yet standing. He mingled their blood with the blood of their men, until blood flowed into the ocean as far as Cyprus. At that moment the horn of Israel was cut off and it is not destined to return from its place until the son of David will come. (Y. Sukkah 5:1, 28b3-28b4)//Esther Rabbah Petichtah 1:3)

Even though suicide and martyrdom are not generally encouraged in Jewish culture and religion, sometimes it seems to be the logical decision, as it was for the women in this story.

Discussion Questions:

1. What thought process would lead anyone to make the decision these women made? Could it be the prospect of being captives and/or slaves? Does this count as martyrdom? As suicide? Both? Neither? Does this count as a

decision out of depression?

2. What role does misunderstanding play in the Jews' misfortune? Can you think of other times in Jewish history when people's misconceptions and misunderstandings of Judaism resulted in the Jews' misfortune? What were they?
3. The end of the story expresses the despair of the Jews under Roman rule in Israel...it truly appears that all hope is over by the time the Bar Kokhba revolt has come and gone. The Temple is destroyed and it will not be rebuilt any time soon. The Romans are in Israel to stay. How did the Jews come back from this place of despair? How can that be a paradigm for us, personally, when we try to come back from a place of despair?