Jewish Tribune – Vayeishev

**The Butler and the Baker**

Why do we have four cups of wine on seder night?

Yes, I know we have yet to celebrate Chanuka and it is highly premature to be discussing Pesach, but actually, this week’s sedrah contains the answer. Read on…

We are all familiar with the dreams of the butler and the baker. The butler dreamed of once again making wine for Pharaoh and the baker dreamed that birds were eating from a basket of bread that was perched on his head.

Yosef interpreted the butler’s dream that in three days he would be returned to his post. The interpretation of the baker’s dream is less positive. In three days’, Pharaoh would hang him and the birds would eat his flesh.

What is less known, is that this famous episode features not just in parshas Vayeishev but on seder night.

How so?

The Yerushalmi (Pesochim 10,5) asks why we have four cups of wine on seder night. The Yerushalmi first gives the more famous answer, that the four cups correspond to the four expressions of geula (redemption): והוצאתי והצלתי וגאלתי ולקחתי.

But the Gemoro gives a second answer. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levis says that the four cups correspond to the four times the word כוס (cup) appear in the story of the butler and the baker.

I can understand the connection between the four expressions of geula, but what has four cups on seder night have to do with the butler and baker in our sedra?

The Aruch Hashulchan gives the following creative answer. I give credit to my dear former colleague Rabbi Barry Katz for sharing this with me many years ago.

The Aruch Hashulchan in his commentary on the Haggadah entitled “Leil Shimurim” asks the following questions on the famous incident in our parsha. Was the crime of the butler or baker more serious? And which one would deserve a greater punishment?

The Aruch Hashulchan argues that the crime of the butler is ostensibly more serious. Serving a cup of wine to Pharaoh with a fly floating on top is more of a disgusting and direct affront to the king. It is more repulsive than a pebble hidden in the bread. Also, the cup is offered directly to Pharaoh, whereas the bread is merely placed on the table.

And yet, the butler is pardoned and the baker is sentenced to death!

Furthermore, how strange that both seem to commit crimes at the same time. What an unusual coincidence.

Also, why does the Torah call their actions a חטא (sin). Surely, it was a careless mistake rather than a sin.

The Aruch Hashulchan therefore suggests that the butler and baker were arch enemies. They hated each other with a passion and were trying to get each other into trouble. The butler therefore planted a pebble in the bread of Pharaoh and the baker placed a fly in the king’s wine.

Pharaoh discovered this and therefore describes their actions as sins. They were guilty of שנאת חנם (baseless hatred). Consequently, he punishes the baker with a harsher punishment as his crime of placing the fly into the cup was worse, but pardons the butler for the lesser crime. And this also explains why these strange events happened to occur at the same time.

What has this to with seder night?

Had the butler and baker wanted to, they could have settled their differences and lived together in the luxury of the palace in harmony forever. But their baseless acrimony destroyed this.

Sadly, the same is true for Klal Yisroel. We could have lived in Eretz Yisroel forever, enjoying life with a Beis Hamikdash. But שנאת חנם ruined it. As a result, we have mourned the destruction ever since and sit on the ground on Tisha B’Av contemplating what could have been.

Tisha B’Av always falls on the same day of the week as the first day of Pesach four months earlier. This year, the first day of Pesach is a Thursday and so is Tisha B’Av.

This is the message of this week’s parsha and of seder night. We could have lived in Eretz Yisroel in harmony forever but שנאת חנם caused our long golus. If we learn the lessons of the four cups of wine, we won’t have to sit on the floor again on this Tisha B’Av (which is always same day of the week as the first day of Pesach).

That, says the Aruch Hashulchan, is the meaning of the Yerushalmi, deriving the four cups of wine from the four references of the word כוס that appear in the story of the butler and the baker in our sedra.

**Rabbi Golker is the** **Menahel of Hasmonean High School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**