

THE LONG NET

From "*The Prisoner and Other Tales of Faith*" by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern,
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It was the first day of Pessach. In the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the Beis HaMikdash, the Great Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court composed of the greatest Rabbis, was in session. On Shabbos and Yom Toy there was no judging of civil cases and they were in session only in case a question might arise concerning the *Korbonnos*. Almost all the seventy-one Rabbis were there, sitting in a semi-circle and discussing Torah questions. One of the members was giving his opinion on a point, when a Clerk of the Sanhedrin announced questioners. A Rabbi of the town was ushered in, followed by several men. The President of the Sanhedrin called upon the Rabbi to put his problem to the Court.

"My Masters!" began the Rabbi. "There is a problem here which seemed at first an unimportant quarrel. But if my suspicions are sound then this is something important and urgent enough to bring straight to you, my Masters, in your capacity as the Beis HaMikdash Authority.

"This man here" — he pointed to a middle-aged man dressed in costly garments of Persian style — "created a disturbance last night at the Seder by quarrelling with his landlord here — he pointed to a portly man with flowing beard and *payos*, dressed in the garb of Yerushalaim's townsmen. "The quarrel was over what portion of the Korban Pessach the guest should receive, and these two witnesses" — he pointed out two Galilean villagers — "were members of the Seder company.

"This is not brought before you as a court case, my Masters, so I believe you will find it possible to consider it on Yom Toy. The curious point is that the man insisted on having the lamb's tail for his portion. When these people came to my house late in the night, I thought at first that I merely had to deal with an ignorant Babylonian who had never heard that the lamb's tail is one of the portions that are burned on the Altar.

"However, the man refused to accept my patient explanations and insisted that a great Rabbi had told him distinctly to insist upon tasting the tail. If he is telling the truth — and he does insist that he is — then there is a mystery here with which only you, my Masters, can deal."

All eyes had turned to the Babylonian, and the expressions on the faces of the Rabbis were grave. The President of the Court addressed the man: "Will you tell us your name and home town, please?"

THE LONG NET

“My name, Rabbeinu,” answered the foreigner, “is Ziggud bar Essur. I come from Arbela, near the upper Tigris. ”

“And do you agree with what this Rabbi has told us?” asked the President. “I do,” answer the Babylonian, “and I am sure that this Court, the highest in the Land, will grant me my right. ”

“Then tell us who told you to make your demand,” said the President.

“No less an authority than Rabbi Yehudah ben Besayroh of Netzivvin!”

A stir went round the Court. How could that great Rabbi make such a suggestion? Was it not clear from the Torah that the tail had to be burnt on the Altar?

The President, however, showed no signs of perturbation. “And how,” he asked, “did it come about that the Rabbi spoke to you about this?”

“When I was returning home from Yerushalaim after Pessach last year, I passed through Netzivvin, and stayed in the Rabbi’s house for Shabbos. I told him how I had enjoyed the Pessach, how well my landlord had treated me, and how I had my choice of the lamb. Then he said, “I am sure you were not allowed to choose just anything you liked; have you ever tasted the tail?” and when I had to admit that I hadn’t, he told me to be sure to ask for it this year — and so I did, only to have it refused!”

The expressions on the faces of the sages were varied. Some signified disbelief, some doubt, and others deep concentration. The President’s smile was kind but inscrutable. “Tell us,” he said, “how much Torah have you learned?”

“Only very little, Rabbi. My father was poor, and I had to help him in business even before I was thirteen.”

“But you learned a little? Will you read to us a little from this Sefer Torah?”

The Babylonian was taken aback, but after a moment he answered: “It was so long ago, my Master, I have quite forgotten how to read. ”

“Then you will recite the Sh’ma to us?”

The Babylonian began, but after the first sentence he started to mumble. When asked to speak up he grew very red in the face and said: “I must confess that I have not said it for many years. I am so busy, always travelling ...”

“I understand,” said the President, still smiling, and looked round the Court. By this time it was clear that his colleagues had understood, too. He ordered the Court to be

THE LONG NET

cleared. When only the judges were left, a short discussion took place. Then the strangers were recalled.

“Our decision,” said the President “is that this case will have to be heard tomorrow. Meanwhile, this man shall be safely lodged in the house of the Beis HaMikdash guard. We also order the Officer of the Mount to send his men in search of Jews from Arbela and the Arbela region who may be found now, here in Yerushalaim. They are to see this man for the purpose of identification. The Levite Guards shall also arrange for a physical examination of their prisoner and report their findings tomorrow. ”

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One evening, four weeks later, at Netzivvin, the aged Rabbi Yehudah ben Besayroh was testing his pupils in the Yeshiva in the laws of Bikkurim, when a man came in and stood respectfully at the back of the Beis HaMedrash until the Rabbi called him.

“Rabbi,” said the man, “I come to inform you, as you requested, of the arrival of the first group of returning pilgrims. Amongst them is a Rabbi from Poom-Bedeessa, who has come out of his way because he has a letter for you from the Sanhedrin. He asks me to tell you that he will be here shortly, as soon as he has stabled his donkey.”

Rabbi Yehudah thanked the man, and told his pupils to repeat the tractate by themselves. He himself sat back and gave himself up to his thoughts.

A letter from the Sanhedrin! Could it be about the affair that had worried him all this year? His mind went back to the incident almost exactly one year earlier.

Spring had come late at Netzivvin. Four weeks after Pessach, the river that rushed down from the hills of Kurdistan was still swollen from the melting snow. Many travellers, returning from their pilgrimage to Yerushalaim, had been held up in the town, waiting for the waters to subside. The Jews of Netzivvin had been glad to put them up. They could not often make the long journey to Yerushalaim themselves, and indeed there was no duty for them to go since they lived outside Eretz Yisroel, but they respected all the more those who went, and were happy to help in the Mitzvah.

Rabbi Yehudah himself had a number of these travellers at his table on that Friday night. Most of them were Rabbis, some of whom had been his pupils. But one man from Arbela, an obviously prosperous merchant, had specifically asked to stay with the Rabbi. Rabbi Yehudah had taken him, particularly as the man had delivered a letter. Rabbi Yehudah often had correspondence with the Rabbis of the Holy Land and usually the letters were carried by pilgrims.

As the evening progressed, the merchant, who had tasted quite an amount of the strong beer, grew more and more talkative, and the Rabbi, though he would have preferred to continue his learned discussion with the others, politely listened to what the man had

THE LONG NET

to say. After all, Pessach in Yerushalaim was something worth talking about, and the merchant told it well. He told of new buildings which Rabbi Yehudah himself had not seen when he was young enough to make the journey. He described the view of the Beis HaMikdash as one came in through the Eastern Gate; the rising terraces of the Inner Court, the Great Altar on the left side — its gleaming white surface partly reddened from the blood of the many Korbannos being brought — and everything dwarfed by the majestic structure on the highest terrace — the Beis HaMikdash itself, more than ten times as tall as a house and at its front just as wide, its varicoloured marble sparkling and shimmering like the waves of a sunlit sea. Through the open entrance of the Front Hall one saw the open doors of the Sanctuary itself. And over these doors — here a peculiar gleam had come into the speaker's eyes — the huge vine, made of solid gold, on which the gold given for the Building Treasury — the Bedek HaBayyis — was stored in the shape of clusters of golden grapes and leaves. "I wish," the merchant had added, "that they would leave me in there alone for just one hour! There must be tons of gold in those grapes!"

He had not noticed the scandalised looks from the people around him, but taking another gulp from his tankard, had gone on to describe Erev Pessach in the Beis HaMikdash.

"By noontime," he said, "you can't move. The Second Court, and even part of the Mount, are packed with people leading their Pessach lambs. When the first group has gone in, the gates of the Inner Court are shut, but you can hear the Levi'im singing the Hallel as the Korbannos are brought. Then those people come out, carrying their lambs to be roasted, and another group comes in, and then yet a third! Such a lot of people! You know, the Kohannim can't quite manage to carry the blood to be sprinkled on the Altar — they form chains, passing the golden or silver vessels to each other. And all these crowds of people are only one for each lamb! Each of them has his group waiting for him, and they get only a morsel each from the lamb, at the end of the Seder. Of course, you've eaten a whole dinner before that, but that little piece of roast lamb tastes the best! And I always get the choicest part, you know! I am a wealthy man and I pay well for my dinner!"

The merchant stopped, and refilled his tankard from the jug in the middle of the table. "Your beer is good, Rabbi," he said. "Pity I couldn't drink any with the Pessach Lamb! Ha, ha, ha!" Again his listeners looked shocked, but the man merely took another deep draught from his tankard. The beer was beginning to tell on him; he suddenly began to chuckle and then went on:

"But I haven't told you the best part of my story! You know how exclusive they are. Everyone must dip himself in the Mikveh, and before that he must be sprinkled with the Purifying Waters on the third day and the seventh day; and anyone who is not circumcised, or doesn't believe in the Torah, must not take part at all. Well — little did

THE LONG NET

my pious landlord dream that his favourite, rich guest is a pure, one-hundred-percent gentile! Ho, ho! ... Ha, ha, ha! ...“ He laughed out loud till he was quite out of breath.

The guests had jumped up with confused exclamations. Their eyes were on the Rabbi.

Rabbi Yehudah had motioned his guests to let him deal with the man. He had thought quickly. Here was a man who had committed a great crime, quite without compunction and with great daring. He must be familiar with Jewish laws and customs sufficiently to pass himself off as a Jew — after all, strange-looking Jews from many countries, speaking all sorts of languages, came up to Yerushalaim. They could not check up on everyone.

What could be done? To punish him here was impossible. This was not Eretz Yisroel; the government would intervene if a gentile was brought before a Jewish Court. To warn Yerushalaim was useless — they would not be able to identify the desecrator amongst such crowds. No, the only thing to do was to lay a trap.

By the time the gentile had recovered from his laughing fit, Rabbi Yehudah’s plan was ready. “You are a daring man indeed,” he addressed the gentile in a half-admiring tone, “but I don’t believe you really tricked them. They probably had a sneaking suspicion that you weren’t one of them. That’s why you never got to eat the best part of the lamb!”

“I sure did, Rabbi!” the gentile had answered. “I was allowed to choose whatever part I liked.”

“Ah,” Rabbi Yehudah had said, “you could choose the best part of what was *on the table*. But did you ever get a chance to eat of the tail? You know that the meat from the part near the tail is the fattest and juiciest part of the whole lamb. You never got a chance to choose that part, did you?”

“The tail?” the gentile had asked with a frown. “You’re right! No, there never was a tail on the lamb when it came to the table. I wonder what happened to the tail.”

That was how it had ended — then. The gentile had moved on, and Rabbi Yehudah had not heard anything further. Had he taken the bait? Had he dared to go again, when he knew that some people knew his secret, people who might chance to meet him in Yerushalaim? This was what Rabbi Yehudah had thought about during the year. And now — what was in the letter?

The letter arrived soon: it was short, but long enough to gladden Rabbi Yehudah’s heart:

***Peace to you, Rabbi Yehudah ben Besayroh, who lives
in Netzivvin, but whose net is spread in Yerushalaim!***

from the Sanhedrin.