



The Mother and Her Seven Sons
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1. The Apocrypha: II Maccabees 7:1-42

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. ² One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors." ³ The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. ⁴ These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. ⁵ When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, ⁶ "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, 'And he will have compassion on his servants.'" ⁷ After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" ⁸ He replied in the language of his ancestors and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. ⁹ And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws." ¹⁰ After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, ¹¹ and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." ¹² As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing. ¹³ After he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. ¹⁴ When he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!" ¹⁵ Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. ¹⁶ But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among mortals, though you also are mortal, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. ¹⁷ Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!" ¹⁸ After him they

brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. ¹⁹ But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!" ²⁰ The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. ²¹ She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, ²² "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. ²³ Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws." ²⁴ Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproachful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his ancestors, and that he would take him for his Friend and entrust him with public affairs. ²⁵ Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. ²⁶ After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. ²⁷ But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native language as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. ²⁸ I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. ²⁹ Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers." ³⁰ While she was still speaking, the young man said, "What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king's command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our ancestors through Moses. ³¹ But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. ³² For we are suffering because of our own sins. ³³ And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and

discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. ³⁴ But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all mortals, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. ³⁵ You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. ³⁶ For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance. ³⁷ I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show

mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, ³⁸ and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.” ³⁹ The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. ⁴⁰ So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. ⁴¹ Last of all, the mother died, after her sons. ⁴² Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures.

2. Lamentations 1:16

16. For these things I weep; my eye, my eye runs down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.

3. Midrash Rabbah - Lamentations 1:16; #50

50. It is related of Miriam, the daughter of Tanhum¹ that she was taken captive with her seven sons. The emperor took and placed them in the innermost of seven rooms. He had the eldest brought and said to him, 'Prostrate yourself before the image.' He answered, 'God forbid! I will not prostrate myself before an image.' 'Why?' asked the king. 'Because it is thus written in our Torah, *I am the Lord thy God*' (Exod. XX, 2). He immediately had him taken out and slain. He had the second brought and said to him, 'Prostrate yourself before the image.' He answered, 'God forbid! My brother did not prostrate himself and I will not.' 'Why?' the king asked. He replied, 'Because it is thus written in our Torah, *Thou shalt have no other gods before Me*' (ib. 3). He immediately ordered him to be slain. He had the third brought and said to him, 'Prostrate yourself before the image.' He answered, 'I will not prostrate myself.' 'Why?' the king asked. 'Because it is written in the Torah, *For thou shalt bow down to no other god*' (ib. XXXIV, 14). He immediately ordered him to be slain. He had the fourth brought who quoted, *He that sacrificeth unto the gods, save unto the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed* (ib. XXII, 19), and he was ordered to be slain. He had the fifth brought, who also quoted, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one* (Deut. VI, 4), and he was immediately ordered to be slain. He had the sixth brought who likewise quoted, *For the Lord thy God is in the midst of thee, a God great and awful* (ib. VII, 21), and he was ordered to be slain. He had the seventh brought, who was the youngest of them all, and the king said, 'My son, prostrate yourself before the image.' He answered, 'God forbid!' 'Why?' asked the king. 'Because it is thus written in our Torah, *Know this day, and lay it to thy heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is none else* (ib. IV, 39). Not only that, but we have sworn to our God that we will not exchange Him for another god; as it is said, *Thou hast avouched the Lord this day to be thy God* (ib. XXVI, 17). And as we

ספר איכה פרק א

(טז) על אלה אני בוכיה עיני ירדה פנים כי חק ממי מנחם משיב נפשי היו בני שוממים כי נבר אויב:

מדרש רבה איכה פרשה א פסקה נ

(נ) מעשה במרים בת נחתום שנשבת היא ושבעה בניה נטלן קיסר ונתנן לגיו מן שבעה קנקלין הביא את הראשון ואמר לו השתחוה לצלם אמר לו ח"ו איני משתחוה לצלם אמר לו למה מפני שכך כתיב בתורתנו (שמות כ') אנכי ה' אלהיך מיד הוציא והרגו הוציא השני ואמר לו השתחוה לצלם א"ל ח"ו אחי לא השתחוה ואני איני משתחוה אמר לו למה אמר לו שכך כתיב בתורה (שם) לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני מיד גזר עליו והרגוהו הוציא השלישי ואמר לו השתחוה לצלם א"ל איני משתחוה אמר לו למה [א"ל] שכתוב בתורה (שם ל"ד) כי לא תשתחוה לאל אחר מיד גזר עליו והרגוהו הוציא הרביעי ואמר פסוקיה (שם כ"ב) זובה לאלהים יחרם גזר עליו והרגוהו הוציא החמישי ואמר גם הוא פסוקיה (דברים ו') שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד מיד גזר עליו והרגוהו הוציא הששי ואמר גם הוא פסוקיה (שם ז') כי ה' אלהיך בקרבך אל גדול ונורא גזר עליו והרגוהו הוציא השביעי והוא היה קטן שבכולן אמר בני השתחוה לצלם אמר לו ח"ו א"ל למה א"ל שכך כתיב בתורתנו (שם ד') וידעת היום והשבות אל לבבך כי ה' הוא האלהים בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת אין עוד ולא עוד אלא שנשבענו לאלהינו שאין אנו ממירין אותו באל אחר שנאמר (שם כ"ו) את ה' האמרת היום וכשם שנשבענו לו כך

¹ Not 'Nahtum' as in the Hebrew text. In Git. 57b the name of the woman is not given. A similar story is related of a woman named Hannah in connection with the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes.

swore to Him, so He swore to us not to exchange us for another people; as it is said, *And the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be His own treasure* (ib. 18). The emperor said to him, 'Your brothers had had their fill of years and of life and had experienced happiness; but you are young, you have had no fill of years and life and have not yet experienced happiness. Prostrate yourself before the image and I will bestow favours upon you.' He replied, 'It is written in our Torah, *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever* (Ex. XV, 18), and it is said, *The Lord is King for ever; the nations are perished out of His land* (Ps. X, 16). You are of no account and so are His enemies. A human being lives to-day and is dead to-morrow, rich to-day and poor to-morrow; but the Holy One, blessed be He, lives and endures for all eternity.' The emperor said to him, 'See, your brothers are slain before you. Behold, I will throw my ring to the ground in front of the image; pick it up so that all may know that you have obeyed my command.' He answered, 'Woe unto you, O emperor! If you are afraid of human beings who are the same as yourself, shall I not fear the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, the God of the universe!' He asked him, 'Has, then, the universe a God?' He replied, 'Shame on you, O emperor! Do you, then, behold a world without a Master!' He asked, 'Has your God a mouth?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *They have mouths, but they speak not* (ib. CXV, 5); in connection with our God it is written, *By the word of the Lord were the heavens made* (ib. XXXIII, 6). 'Has your God eyes?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *Eyes have they, but they see not* (ib. CXV, 5); in connection with our God it is written, *The eyes of the Lord, that run to and fro through the whole earth* (Zech. IV, 10). 'Has your God ears?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *They have ears, but they hear not* (Ps. CXV, 6); in connection with our God it is written, *And the Lord hearkened, and heard* (Mal. III, 16). 'Has your God a nose?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *Noses have they, but they smell not* (Ps. loc. cit.); in connection with our God it is written, *And the Lord smelled the sweet savour* (Ger VIII, 21). 'Has your God hands?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *They have hands, but they handle not* (Ps. CXV, 7); in connection with our God it is written, *Yea, My hand hath laid the foundation of the earth* (Isa. XLVIII, 13). 'Has your God feet?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *Feet have they, but they walk not* (Ps. loc. cit.); in connection with our God it is written, *And His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives* (Zech. XIV, 4). 'Has your God a throat?' He answered, 'In connection with your gods it is written, *Neither speak they with their throat* (Ps. loc. cit.); in connection with our God it is written, *And sound goeth out of His mouth* (Job XXXVII, 2). The king asked, 'If there are all these attributes in your God, why does He not deliver you out of my hand in the same manner that He rescued Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the hands of Nebuchadnezzar?' He answered, 'Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were worthy men, and king Nebuchadnezzar was deserving that a miracle should be performed through him. You, however, are undeserving; and as for ourselves, our lives are forfeit to heaven. If you do not slay us, the Omnipresent has numerous executioners. There are many bears, wolves, serpents, leopards, and scorpions to attack and kill us; but in the end the Holy One, blessed be He, will avenge our blood on you.'

נשבע לנו שאין ממירנו באומה אחרת שנא' (דברים כ"ז) וה' האמירך היום א"ל קיסר אחיך שבעו ימים ושבעו חיים וראו טובה ואתה קטן לא שבעת ימים ולא שבעת חיים ולא ראית טוב בעולם השתחוה לצלם ואעשה כך טובות א"ל כתיב בתורתנו (שמות ט"ו) ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד ואומר (תהלים י') ה' מלך עולם ועד אבדו גוים מארצו ואתם בטלים ואויביו בטלים ב"ו היום חי ולמחר מת היום עשיר ולמחר עני אבל הקב"ה חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים א"ל קיסר ראה אחיך הרוגים לפניך והריני משליך טבעתי לארץ לפני הצלם והגביהה כדי שידעו הכל ששמעת לקולי א"ל חבל עליך קיסר מה אם אתה מתירא מבני אדם שכמותך אני לא אתירא ממ"ה הקב"ה אלהי עולם א"ל וכי יש אלוה לעולם א"ל אללי עליך קיסר וכי עולם של הפקר ראית א"ל וכי יש פה לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב (תהלים קט"ו) פה להם ולא ידברו ובאלהינו כתיב (שם ל"ג) בדבר ה' שמים נעשו א"ל וכי יש עינים לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב עינים להם ולא יראו ובאלהינו כתיב (זכריה ד') עיני ה' המה משוטטים בכל הארץ א"ל וכי יש אזנים לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב אזנים להם ולא ישמעו ובאלהינו כתיב (מלאכי ג') ויקשב ה' וישמע א"ל וכי יש אף לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב אף להם ולא יריחו ובאלהינו כתיב (בראשית ח) וירח ה' את ריח הניחוח א"ל וכי יש ידיים לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב ידיהם ולא ימישון ובאלהינו כתיב (ישעיה מ"ח) אף ידי יסדה ארץ א"ל וכי יש רגלים לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב רגליהם ולא יהלכו ובאלהינו כתיב (זכריה י"ד) ועמדו רגליו ביום ההוא על הר הזיתים אמר לו וכי יש גרון לאלהיכם א"ל באלהיכם כתיב ולא יהגו בגרונם ובאלהינו כתיב (איוב ל"ו) והגה מפיו יצא א"ל אם יש בו כל המדות הללו באלהיכם מפני מה אינו מציל אתכם מידי כמו שהציל לחנניה מישאל ועזריה מיד נבוכדנצר א"ל חנניה מישאל ועזריה כשרים היו ונבוכדנצר מלך הגון היה ליעשות נס על ידו אבל אתה אינך הגון ואנו נתחייבנו מיתה לשמים אם אין אתה הורגנו הרבה הורגים יש למקום הרבה דובים הרבה זאבים ואריות ונחשים ונמרים ועקרבים שיפגעו בנו ויהרגונו אלא לסוף הקב"ה עתיד ליפרע ממך את דמינו מיד גזר עליו להורגו אמרה לו אמו בחיי ראשך קיסר תנה את בני ואחבקו ואנשקו נתנהו לה והוציאה לו דדיה והניקתו חלב אמרה לו בחיי ראשך קיסר

The king immediately ordered him to be put to death. The child's mother said to him, 'By the life of your head, O emperor, give me my son that I may embrace and kiss him.' They gave him to her, and she bared her breasts and suckled him. She said to the king, 'By the life of your head, O emperor, put me to death first and then slay him.' He answered her, 'I cannot agree to that because it is written in your Torah, *And whether it be cow or ewe, ye shall not kill it and its young both in one day*' (Lev. XXII, 28). She retorted, 'You unutterable fool! Have you already fulfilled all the commandments save only this one!' He immediately ordered him to be slain. The mother threw herself upon her child and embraced and kissed him. She said to him, 'My son, go to the patriarch Abraham and tell him, "Thus said my mother, 'Do not preen yourself [on your righteousness], saying I built an altar and offered up my son, Isaac.' Behold, our mother built seven altars and offered up seven sons in one day. Yours was only a test, but mine was in earnest.'" While she was embracing and kissing him, the king gave an order and they killed him in her arms. When he had been slain, the Sages calculated the age of that child and found that he was two years, six months, and six and a half hours old. At that time all the peoples of the world cried out, 'What does their God do for them that they are all the time slain for His sake!' And concerning them it is written, *Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day* (Ps. XLIV, 23). After a few days the woman became demented and fell from a roof and died, to fulfil what is said, *She that hath borne seven languisheth* (Jer. XV, 9). A *Bath Kol* issued forth and proclaimed, 'A joyful mother of children' (Ps. CXIII, 9); and the Holy Spirit cried out, FOR THESE THINGS I WEEP

הרגני תחלה ואחר כך הרגהו אמר לה קיסר איני שומע לידך מפני שכתוב בתורתכם (ויקרא כ"ב) ושור או שה או אתו ואת בנו לא תשחטו ביום אחד אמרו לו שוטה שבעולם כבר קיימת כל המצות ולא נשאר לך אלא זו בלבד מיד צוה עליו להרגו נפלה אמו עליו והיתה מחבקתו ומנשקתו ואמרה לו בני לך אצל אברהם אביכם ואמור לו כך אמרה אמי אל תזוח דעתך עליך ותאמר בניתי מזבח והעליתי את יצחק בני אמו בנתה שבעה מזבחות והעלתה שבעה בנים ביום אחד אתה נסיון ואני מעשה עד שהיתה מנשקתו ומחבקתו גזר עליו והרגוהו עליה וכיון שנהרג שיערו חכמים שנותיו של אותו תינוק ונמצא בן שתי שנים וששה חדשים ושש שעות ומחצה באותה שעה צעקו כל או"ה ואמרו מה אלהיהם של אלו עושה להם שכך נהרגין עליו בכל שעה ועליהם כתיב (תהלים מ"ד) כי עליך הורגנו כל היום לאחר ימים נשתטית אותה האשה ונפלה מן הגג ומתה לקיים מה שנא' (ירמיה ט"ו) אומללה יולדת השבעה ובת קול יוצאת ואומרת (תהלים קי"ג) אם הבנים שמחה ורוח הקדש צווחת ואומרת על אלה אני בוכיה: