

Fascinating INSIGHTS

יא' אייר תשפ"ה
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Not Liable for the Blood Libel

In 1840 in Damascus, Syria, the infamous Damascus blood libel took place. On February 5th of that year, a Catholic monk named Padre Tomas and his Arab servant, Ibrahim Amara, mysteriously disappeared.

Padre Tomas was involved in dubious business and the two men were likely killed by merchants with whom he had conflicts. Nevertheless, rumors quickly spread that the Jews had murdered them to use their blood in baking matzos for Pesach.



Among those arrested was R' Yaakov Antebi.¹ He was brutally tortured; at one point, an officer ordered a soldier to decapitate him. The soldier first pressed the blunt side of his sword against R' Antebi's neck, asking, "Will you confess to killing the monk?" When Rabbi Antebi

¹ He served as Chief Rabbi and *dayan* of Damascus for over 30 years and passed away in 1846. After his release from his tiny, infested prison cell on August 28, 1840, he resolved to leave Damascus and settle in Yerushalayim. R' Antebi later recorded a detailed

account of his experiences during the blood libel in a letter to Moses Montefiore, which was also included in the sefer B'ohr Hachaim by R' Chaim Kapusi and in an appendix to the sefer Lkedoshim Asher Baaretz.

refused, the soldier turned the sharp edge of the sword against his neck and repeated the demand.

Later R' Antebi² related the following explanation that entered his mind during the saga:



He recalled the gemara³ that says אפילו חרב חדה מונחת על צווארו... even if a sharp sword is on a person's neck, he shouldn't refrain from praying for mercy. Why

does it say "sharp sword"? Aren't all swords sharp? R' Antebi explained based on his harrowing experience: The torturer had first used the dull side of the sword before turning to the sharp edge. Thus, the gemara highlights the moment of greatest danger — when the sharp blade itself is at one's throat — teaching that even then, one must not give up hope.

Vilna Gaon's Father's Explanation

We have encountered many explanations from the Vilna Gaon but how often do we come across an explanation from his father?

R' Avraham, son of the Gra, quotes his grandfather (the Vilna Gaon's father) regarding the mesachtos of Brachos, Nazir, Yevamos and Krisus which all conclude with the statement תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, שנאמר: וכל בניך לימודי ה' ורב שלום בניך, Talmidei Chachamim increase peace in the world, as it says, and all your children will be students of Hashem, and abundant peace will your children have.⁴ Firstly, these four mesachtos that conclude with this is alluded to in the word we find in this concluding gemara, בריך, as it serves as an acronym for ברכות, נזיר, יבמות, כריתות.

Now, let's move on. Each of these mesachtos is fundamentally connected to *shalom*, peace, which is what this concluding statement of the gemara is about:

1. Brachos deals with peace between man and Hashem, as it discusses brachos, Shema and tefillah.

2. Nazir focuses on peace between man and his family, as it teaches that one who witnesses a sotah's downfall should abstain from wine.⁵

3. Yevamos emphasizes peace between a person and his fellow as we see by ensuring the continuity of a brother's legacy through *yibbum*.⁶

4. Krisus pertains to peace between a person and his own soul, preventing it from being spiritually cut off (*kares*).⁷

So now we see the commonality between these mesachtos and why they are grouped together with this statement of chazal of peace. May we all merit to pursue peace in all its aspects.



Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R' Mordechai Friedlander ztz"l for close to five years and received semichah from R' Zalman Nechemia Goldberg ztz"l. Rabbi Alt has written thousands of Torah articles on numerous topics for various websites and publications and is the author of ten books including the recently released "Astounding Torah Insights about the Human Body." His writings, many of which have been translated into Yiddish, Hebrew, German and French, inspire people across the spectrum of Jewish observance to live with the vibrancy and beauty of Torah. His shiurim can be found on various websites including Kol Halashon's. Rabbi Alt lives with his wife and family in Kiryat Yearim (where the Aron was for 20 years [Shmuel 1, 7:1,2]) where he studies, lectures, writes and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

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² The Antebi (ענתבי) family originated from Ein Tav, a small village near Aleppo. Thus, the name Antebi indicates a person from Ein Tav.

³ Brachos 10a.

⁴ Yeshaya 54:13.

⁵ Sota 2a.

⁶ See Devarim 25:6.

⁷ Otzar Hayedios, Vol. 3, p. 551.