

Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chananya: the Redemption of Rebbe Yishmael

*Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chananya* was one of the chief disciples of *Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai*. As we discussed last week, he lived through the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash* and loyally carried his *rebbe* out of the holy city in order to facilitate an eventual salvation for Torah and *Yerushalayim*. The *Gemara Chagiga* informs us that *Rebbe Yehoshua* became one of the most effective representatives of *Klal Yisrael* to the Roman authorities. He would travel to Rome and intercede on behalf of his Jewish brethren. He also was a very effective defender against early Chirstian polemics attacking the Jewish people after the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*.

The *Gemara Gittin* (58a) recounts that *Rebbe Yehoshua* once traveled to Rome and was told of a very handsome little boy who was imprisoned and ready to be sold into slavery. "He went and stood by the entrance to the prison. He said, "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?" (*Yeshayahu* 42:24). That child answered (reciting the continuation of the verse in *Yeshayahu*): "Did not the Lord, He against Whom we have sinned, and in Whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient to His law?" Seeing this precocious child's wise response and confident that he could become a great sage of Israel, *Rebbe Yehoshua* declared with an oath that he would redeem the child for any price. "העבודה! By the temple service, I will not move from here until I redeem him!" He eventually redeemed the child for an exorbitant sum of money. Sure enough, this child grew up to become the great *Rebbe Yishmael* the son of *Elisha*, a disciple of *Rebbe Yehoshua* and contemporary of *Rebbe Akiva*. (The famous 13 exegetical principles we recite before *pesukei d'zimra* every morning were expounded by *Rebbe Yishmael*.)

What is the significance of this child's beauty? And why was *Rebbe Yehoshua* so confident that he would become great? Additionally, as *Tosafot* point out (*ibid*), it is normally prohibited to redeem a captive for such an extreme price. *Tosafot* answer that this child was so precocious and unique that the normal limitations did not apply. This just exacerbates our original question. Yes, it is impressive to finish a verse in *Yeshayahu* (I certainly could not). But was this such an incredible feat that would necessitate such extraordinary measures?

The *Doros HaRishonim* and other *Achronim* note that the patterns here are unmistakable: 1) A Jewish child who was sold into slavery shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem, 2) He is exceptionally handsome and also remarkably wise, And 3) his name was *Yishmael ben Elisha*.

This child was a grandson of *Rebbe Yishmael Kohen Gadol*, the Cedar of Lebanon who was martyred by the Romans shortly before the destruction of the temple. His father *Elisha* (who was himself named after his own grandfather) named his son after his holy martyred father, bestowing him with the name *Yishmael*. Just like his namesake, this child was exceedingly handsome and wise.

(Parenthetically, this beauty was shared by the entire family. We recite a *kinna* on *Tisha b'Av* that recounts the tragic end of the beautiful son and daughter of *Rebbe Yishmael Kohen Gadol*. This *kinna* is describing the uncle and aunt of the child that *Rebbe Yehoshua* found.)

When the Romans stripped off the face of *Rebbe Yishmael Kohen Gadol* and stole away the prized possessions of Jerusalem, they were laying claim to his spiritual beauty and the *tiferet* of

*Yerushalayim. Rebbe Yehoshua* was well aware that this metaphoric thievery would lead to vicious polemical attacks against the Jewish people for thousands of years to come.

Which is why *Rebbe Yehoshua* is so fascinated when he hears of a beautiful child who is exceedingly wise. Could it be that this child is a descendant of the towering Cedar, *Rebbe Yishmael Kohen Gadol*? How fitting was *Rebbe Yehoshua*'s oath, "by the holy service of the temple!" He had discovered a hidden gem, a descendant of the great *tzaddik* who was the ultimate *eved Hashem* in the *Beit HaMikdash*! True, the face of *Rebbe Yishmael* had been whisked away to Rome, but *Rebbe Yehoshua* now saw a way to secretly extract a spark from *Rebbe Yishmael*, bring it back to *Eretz Yisrael*, and fan it into a holy flame.

We will *be'ezrat Hashem* discuss *Rebbe Yishmael*'s unique Torah legacy next week.