

Shushan Purim Dvar Torah 5785
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As you may have seen from the email announcements this week, today is Shushan Purim. Whether or not one lives in a walled city, there's one very important ritual of Shushan Purim that's observed by Jews everywhere, namely starting to freak out about Pesach. So in that vein, I want to take a look at a perplexing and confusing line from the Haggadah, which has troubled me ever since I was a child, and perhaps many of you as well. The line is a pretty well-known one: **וְאַתָּא שׁוּנָא וְאַכְלָה לְגַדְיָא, דְּזָבִין אָבָא בְּתֵרֵי זֻזִי. חַד גַּדְיָא, חַד גַּדְיָא.** Then came a cat and ate the goat, my father bought for two zuzim, chad gadya, chad gadya. The question I want to investigate is: How on earth could a cat eat a goat?

To try to answer this question, I decided to investigate what our tradition has to say about cats. Surprisingly and disappointingly, cats don't appear at all in the Tanakh. But of course the Talmud has a lot to say, including two remarkable stories about hungry cats that might shed some light on our song. (These stories deserve all sorts of trigger warnings.)

The first story comes from Berachot 60b: "Rabbi Akiva was walking along the road and came to a certain city. He inquired about lodging and they did not give him any. He said: Everything that God does, it's for the best. He went and slept in a field, and he had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a candle (**תִּרְנַגּוּלָא וְחִמְרָא וְשִׂרְגָא**). A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle; a cat came and ate the rooster; and a lion came and ate the donkey. **אַתָּא זִיקָא כְּבִיָּה לְשִׂרְגָא. אַתָּא שׁוּנָא אַכְלִיה לְתִרְנַגּוּלָא. אַתָּא אַרְיָה אַכְלִיה.** (**לְחִמְרָא**.) He said: Everything that God does, it's for the best. That night, an army came and took the entire city into captivity. He said to them: Didn't I tell you? Everything that God does, it's all for the best." (Because if the wind hadn't blown out his candle and the cat and lion hadn't eaten his animals, he presumably would have been captured as well.)

It's hard to know whether the unknown author of Chad Gadya knew this Gemara, but the language is so close that it's really tempting to speculate! Incidentally, according to the Wikipedisher Rebbe, the song first appeared in a Haggadah that was printed in Prague in 1590, which I'll just point out is almost exactly around the time when the Golem of Prague is said to have lived. Coincidence?

Our very hungry cat makes a second appearance in another Gemara, from Bava Kamma 80b. "Rav, Shmuel, and Rav Asi were at a house to attend a bris (some say it was a pidyon haben). Rav would not enter before Shmuel, and Shmuel would not enter before Rav Asi, and Rav Asi would not enter before Rav. They said: Which of us should stay outside? Let Shmuel stay behind, and let Rav and Rav Asi go inside. While this was going on, a cat came and severed the baby's hand (אֶתָּא שׁוּנְרָא קָטָעִיהּ לִידָא דְיִבּוֹקָא). Rav emerged from the house and taught: 'Regarding cats: It is permitted to kill one, and it is forbidden to possess one, and they are not subject to the prohibition on theft, or the requirement of returning lost property.'"

Oof! I want to take these out of order. Three of Rav's statements - if I kill or steal your cat, I'm not liable, and if I find your cat, I'm not required to return it - can be summed up by saying that there is no property interest in a cat. That is, you can't really own a cat, which is something that's well-known to everyone who owns a cat. Nevertheless, many of us are probably perturbed by his other statement, that it's prohibited to own a cat (as opposed to just impossible). And you're not alone - the Gemara also challenges this statement, bringing a baraita saying that it's permitted to own dogs, cats, monkeys, and weasels, in order to catch mice. They resolve the contradiction as follows: Obviously, Rav's statement that it's prohibited to own a cat applies to white cats, which are dangerous, while the baraita applies to black cats, which aren't dangerous. (I swear I'm not making this up.) But then someone objects that the cat in our story was a black cat, and then someone else says that it yes, it was a black cat, but it was the offspring of a white cat, and then... This is why Talmud is the best.

Now, I said before that cats don't appear at all in the Tanakh, but that's not entirely true. I would posit that Rav's antipathy to cats derives from an ancient midrashic understanding that, in fact, Haman was a cat. Obviously, one of the white variety, who after not being sufficiently worshipped, licked his wounds and plotted his revenge. Sounds just like a cat, right? And there's some even stronger textual evidence, which is totally rock-solid, at least after a few drinks. We read at the end of the Megillah that the holiday is called Purim, al sheim hapurr, after the purr that Haman let loose. And, lest you not find this convincing, it explains a few verses earlier, "hapurr, hu hagonal" - the purr was really more of a growl. QED.

To tie this all together, there's an incredible statement in the Talmud (Gittin 57b, Sanhedrin 96b) that some of Haman's descendants studied Torah in Bnei Brak. There's so much to say here about the possibility of teshuva and reconciliation with our foes, but I want to zoom in on the location. In the Haggadah, Bnei Brak is the site of the famous seder that went on all night until the morning Shema, featuring five rabbis: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, Rabbi Tarfon, and of course, Rabbi Akiva... who, as we just learned, had his life saved by the miraculous intervention of a cat. A black cat, obviously, who only attacks chickens and not babies... but could it have been the descendant of a white cat, the ultimate white cat, Haman himself? After saving Rabbi Akiva, did the cat go on to a life of Torah study, and secure an invitation to Rabbi Akiva's Seder? Might it even be the case that the seder went on so long because the five rabbis were composing an early version of Chad Gadya, or should I say Chad Tarnegola, celebrating their scholarly feline friend, who by a selfless act of eating chicken managed to save Rabbi Akiva from capture? Was this forgotten part of the story then perhaps preserved by the Golem of Prague, who changed some of the details and set it down in the version that we have today? I will leave it to the many distinguished scholars in this room to try to answer these very important questions. Shabbat Shalom and Shushan Purim Sameach.