

The Persian King, the Rabbi, and the Slave

By Yossi Ives

The Talmud¹ describes an encounter between the Persian King Shapur I² and the distinguished rabbi, Rav Yehuda³, along with his servant Bati bar Tovi.

The Persian king was knowledgeable in Jewish law,⁴ and there are many reports of his encounters with the great rabbis of his era⁵ – especially the famed Shmuel, one of the outstanding personalities of the Talmudic era and the head of the Neharda'ah Academy. In the story below, Shapur is meeting with Shmuel's leading student and successor, Rav Yehuda.

Stab, Then Serve

The story begins with the two men engaged in conversation when an *etrog* (citron) fruit was brought to them.

The king pulled out a knife, cut a slice, and handed it to Bati bar Tovi, the servant. He then thrust the knife into the ground ten times (to cleanse it from non-kosher residue) and cut a slice for Rav Yehuda. Bati was offended that Shapur had served him a slice before cleansing the knife. Turning to the king, he protested: "Is this man [referring to himself] not a Jewish person?" In other words, "Don't the laws of kosher apply to me too?!"

We presume he regretted asking this question, given the king's response. There are actually two versions of the king's retort that are reported in the Talmud – neither of them flattering to Bati. According to the first version, Shapur tells Bati that he knows Rav Yehuda to be pious and scrupulous about religious practice, but he is not at all sure he can say the same for Bati.

According to the second version, it gets even worse. Rav Yehuda and Bati were guests at the Persian royal palace, and it was customary there to offer guests the services of a "comfort woman" to add to the enjoyment of their stay. When that service was offered to Rav Yehuda, he politely but firmly declined. But when the same was offered to Bati, he was more than happy to accept.

Word had gotten back to the king, so in response to Bati's protest over the differential treatment he received with regards to the fruit, Shapur retorted: "I recall what you did last night!" In other words, "Don't act so pious, as if you are strict about Jewish practice."

With that, the matter – and the story – ended.

Why Did the King Act as He Did?

This story is confusing for several reasons. Two wrongs don't make a right. Just because Shapur was unconvinced about Bati's piety, how does that make it right to give him non-kosher food? Even if the king knew

Bati had accepted the comfort woman's services, why should it be presumed that he would not keep other aspects of *halacha*?

Moreover Shapur was planning to stab the knife into the ground anyway, for the sake of Rav Yehuda. He could have easily done so a moment earlier for the benefit of Bati. Was he just trying to have a cheap stab at Bati (excuse the pun)?

Was Bati Jewish?

The Rebbe answers these questions in a simple yet brilliant manner, by way of a much bigger question: The Talmud tells us that Bati was a non-Jewish-born slave who had never completed his conversion to Judaism,⁶ and thus did not have the full status of a Jew. Basically, Bati was a slave who was freed, but he never accepted his release contract. According to Tosafot,⁷ this means that he was still allowed to marry a non-Jewish woman, and not yet permitted to a Jewish woman.

According to this view, questionable as his morals may have been, Bati did not violate Jewish law by accepting the favor from his royal host. We may presume that Shapur, knowledgeable in Jewish law, knew this rule, and Bati's limbo status was widely known.⁸ If so, Shapur's reference to "what you did last night" was unfair and irrelevant, as Bati was not breaking *halacha*. Why, then, did Shapur bring up the whole matter?

What Could Be Wrong With Sliced Fruit?

It must be, says the Rebbe, that Shapur did not think Bati did anything wrong, but he understood that he need not be concerned about giving Bati the slice of fruit before purifying the knife.

How could this be?

Shapur's action was not because there was reason to expect actual non-kosher substances on the knife. We may assume that in a vast royal palace they would not use the same knife for slicing fruit and cutting meat. Rather, the concern at hand relates to something known as *bishulei akum*, food that has entirely kosher ingredients but is cooked by a non-Jew.

The rabbis in the time of the Mishna⁹ decreed that Jews should refrain from consuming certain food cooked by idolators lest they come to consume their wine, which could lead to intermarriage. Shapur understood that Rav Yehuda was bound by this decree and would want to avoid consuming any food cooked in his palace. That explains why he stuck the knife into the ground repeatedly, in case the knife had been used with other cooked fruit.

Bati, however, was a completely different matter. You see, the entire reason for the decree was to discourage intermarriage, which Bati wasn't prevented from, given he had never completed his conversion process. There was therefore no reason for him to abide by that stricture; it didn't apply to him.

We now understand what Shapur was trying to convey when he told Bati, “I recall what you did last night.” You don’t refrain from relationships with idolatrous women, so there is no reason for you to require the knife to be cleansed. It was as if Shapur was saying: “You have no reason to be offended by my actions. I did not purify the knife on account of actual non-kosher substances that you would be concerned about, but only due to a stricture that doesn’t apply to you at all.”

This story about the happenings in an exotic Persian palace resonate down to our times. Shapur venerated Rav Yehuda, because he knew he was true to his values. Because Rav Yehuda respected himself and his own religion, Shapur respected them too. Had Shapur thought that Rav Yehuda would easily forgo his strict observance of kosher, he most likely would have not bothered to clean his knife. It was the rabbi’s firmness in upholding his religious standards that earned him respect from a powerful monarch.¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. End of Tractate Avoda Zara.
2. There were two Persian King Shapurs. The first was a good friend of the Jews and had many interactions with the rabbis of his day. The second King Shapur was hostile to the Jews (and the Christians) and his persecutions led to a significant decline in Jewish life in Babylon.
3. In the text of the Talmud, it says “Mar” Yehuda, but both Rashi and Tosafot say “Rav” Yehuda. It most likely refers to Yehuda bar Yechezkel, founder and head of the Pumpedita academy in Babylon, successor to the illustrious Shmuel.
4. Rashi and Tosafot on Bava Metzia 119a.
5. Such as in the Talmud Berachot 56a, Moed Katan 26a, Bava Metzia 119a, Sanhedrin 88a.
6. Talmud, Kiddushin 70b.
7. Ad. loc.
8. See Talmud, Kiddushin 69b.
9. Tractate Avoda Zara 36b.
10. Adapted from Likkutei Sichot, vol. 19, Parshat Devarim, V.

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