



Talmud Tales – Session 28 – For the Good

BT Taanit 21a

They said about Nahum of Gamzo that he was blind in both eyes, his two hands were cut off, his two legs were amputated, and his whole body was full of boils, and he was lying in a dilapidated house, with the legs of his bed in bowls of water so that the ants should not crawl up onto him.

One time his disciples wanted to remove his bed and then clear everything out of the house. He said to them, “My children, empty out the furniture and then clear out my bed. For I guarantee you, so long as I am in the house, the house won’t fall down.” So they cleared out the furniture and afterward they cleared out his bed and the house fell down.

His disciples said to him, “My lord, now, since you are completely righteous, how did this condition come upon you?”

He said to them, “My children, I brought it on myself. For one time I was walking on the way to the house of my father-in-law, and with me I had three well-loaded asses, one with food, one with drink, and one with delicacies. A poor man came and stopped me on the way and said to me, ‘My lord, feed me.’ I said to him, ‘Wait until I unload the donkey,’ but I didn’t have a moment to unload the donkey before his soul went forth.

I went and fell on his face and said, ‘My eyes, which did not take pity on your eyes — let them be blind. My hands, which had no pity on your hands — let them be cut off. My feet, that did

not have pity on your feet — let them be cut off.’ And I did not calm down until I had said, ‘Let my whole body be covered with boils.’”

They said to him, “Woe is us, that we have seen you in such straits.”

He said to them, “Woe would it have been for me, had you not seen me in such straits!”

And why did they call him Nahum of Gamzo? Because whatever happened to him, he would say, “This too is for the good” [*gam zo l'tovah*].

Once the Israelites wanted to send a gift to the household of Caesar. They said, “Who will go? Let Nahum of Gamzo go, because he is experienced in miracles.” They sent along a chest full of precious stones and pearls. He went. At night he came to a certain inn. During the night, the guests in the inn went and took all the precious stones and pearls from the chest and filled it up with dirt. The next day when he saw it, he said, “This too is for the good.”

When he got to the ruler’s palace, they opened the chest and found it was full of dirt. The king wanted to kill all of them. He said, “The Jews are ridiculing me.”

Nahum of Gamzo said, “This too is for the good.”

Elijah came along and appeared in the form of one of them [the Romans]. He said to the king, “Perhaps this dirt comes from the dirt of Abraham their father, for when he threw dirt against the enemy, it turned into swords, and when he drew stubble, it turned into arrows: ‘His sword makes them as dust, his bow as the driven stubble’ (Isa. 41:2).”

Now there was a certain city that the Romans had been unable to conquer. They tried it out [by using the dirt] and conquered it. They took Nahum of Gamzo to the treasury and filled his chest with precious stones and pearls and sent him away with great marks of honor. When he was going home, he stopped again for the night at the same inn, and was asked, “What did you bring with you that they paid you such great honor?”

He said to them, “What I took from here, I brought there.”

[Thinking the dirt under the inn to be miraculous] They tore down their inn and brought the rubble to the household of the king. They said to him, “The dirt that was brought here was ours.”

They tried it out and found there was nothing to it. They executed those innkeepers.”