

Abiyima'el

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As the sun rose higher on the morning we call Christmas, you could tell that sheep in great numbers had, for some reason, come much closer to the town of Bethlehem than anyone cared for. The prospect of an unusually warm spring day meant that the stench of their droppings would grow worse, and though Bethlehem was situated on the top of a modest hill, there would be little breeze that day to send the scent away.

Yes, a warm spring day. Just because we celebrate Christmas in December doesn't mean it happened in the bleak mid-winter, not that mid-winter on the southern Mediterranean coast is all that bleak – though the hill country of Judea did have its share of snow year by year.

And so there was much murmuring and complaining as people began their daily chores. Stalls were opened in the market, the magistrate set up his bench at the city gate, Gamaliel the rabbi led morning prayers and sat at the bema in the synagogue to answer questions.

The town's bakers were particularly annoyed. Bethlehem means "house of bread," and the name was well deserved. The town was situated between the fields where wheat, millet, barley and spelt grew and the city of Jerusalem, with its large population and the voracious appetites of Jews and Gentiles alike.

Bakers would begin their day shortly after midnight. Fires were lit in and around the ovens and allowed several hours to heat the clay to baking temperature. The flour and water that they mixed the previous day was by now bubbling with life, and with deft hands lumps of dough were grabbed from bowls and in one motion slapped onto the sides of the oven. Just a few minutes later the loaves were retrieved with a sharp stick and tossed into baskets. An hour before dawn a caravan of ox-carts would head northeast to Jerusalem to meet the market-goers' demands for their daily bread.

That night their routine was interrupted by the smell and the bleating of the sheep. There were strange, high-pitched sounds in the air, and bright lights that flashed around the surrounding hills, but were also especially bright above the town itself. It was as if the deep baritone of the desert storms the hill country was susceptible to had decided, for a change, to speak in a tenor voice, and that the usual flashes of lightning burned on and on like torches.

The distractions led to more than a few burnt loaves, and the promise of disappointed customers in the morning – customers, in that very unstable economy, that a business owner could scarcely afford to lose.

There were a few, mostly young boys, who did not complain that morning. In fact, it was for them a welcome windfall of fortune.

They were young, not more than seven or eight Passovers. They were mostly orphans and homeless. They busied themselves each day scouring the hills for tufts of dried grass, gleanings of straw at the edges of farm fields, and most precious of all, dung from the sheep and goats and especially donkeys if they could get near enough to their pens.

All of this they mixed together and stashed in secret places (so they hoped) for the week or so it took to dry them out into fuel for Bethlehem's ovens.

As the dung dried into a hard lump, any foulness that might have been in it at the beginning completely disappeared, and when fully cured it burned hot, without any noticeable odor or ill effects to oven or to bread.

The boys would offer their wares to the bakers each night as the fires were to be lit, and hope for a coin -- a *lepton*, or perhaps two, in exchange – though it was more typical for them to receive a loaf of bread for their labors, and probably not one of the best of the batch. Life in the days of King Herod the Great was hard for the 99%.

If a particular baker was stingy in paying for fuel, Gamaliel, the rabbi, would make a visit with a reminder of all of the places that Torah commands generosity to the poor and the care of orphans and widows.

Similarly, if a farmer harvested hay or barley all the way to the edge of their field, they would be reminded of the text from Leviticus commanding that gleanings be left for the poor and for travelers.

Suffice it to say that the whole system, from the grain harvest to the delivery of bread to the capital city, was fragile.

Among the dozen or so boys who worked this system there was one the bakers called Il'd Mililch – the “dirty boy.” What his real name was nobody knew, not even the boy himself. His skin and features were darker than most of those who were born in the Kingdom of Judea, leading to speculation that he was the bastard son of some traveler who took advantage of his mother’s hospitality. She had died so long ago that no one even remembered her name, and as a toddler the dirty boy was passed from family to family as little more than property. One day he met a boy who was gathering fuel and found himself envious of his freedom. A very few weeks later he set out on his own.

He was also called “dirty boy” because he was not afraid to pick up the various dropping with his hands, rather than push them around with a stick or a piece of broken pot. Of course, that meant that at the end of the day, he was not fit to sit at a supper table, even if he had someone who might invite him.

As he went from baker to baker each evening, they would call out to him, “Il'd Mililch, how much to you have for me?”

He would always respond in the same way. “I am not a dirty boy! I am Abiyma’el, because God is my father.”

“Then if you are Abiyma’el, why do your hands reek of dung? Why does your father not dress you in fine linen and let you feast on lamb or goat every day?”

For adults the exchange seemed full of humor, and basically harmless. But for an eight or nine-year-old boy, every time he heard the question it cut more deeply into his heart.

One day, he was returning near sunset into town, having had little luck collecting in the hills. He chanced to pass the rabbi's house, and saw the rabbi, Gamaliel, standing at the gate.

"Are you the one they call Il'd Mililch?"

Yes, but that is not my name. I am Abiyma'el, because God is my father."

The rabbi smiled broadly. "Yes, God is indeed your father, and may the Holy One welcome you into the kingdom of heaven when the day comes.

"But do you have another name?"

The boy's mouth was open for a long moment while he searched his memory. "Sir, I do not know if I have any other name. Since I was little, they all have called me the 'dirty boy.'"

He looked at his dirty hands and darkness of his arms and legs and feet and felt deep shame.

"No," the rabbi said, "Abiyma'el is your name now and so shall it be."

It was odd to hear the rabbi make an assertion, rather than ask a question. And even as this thought passed through his head the boy understood that it was a blessing, a *mitzvah*.

"Now, I understand that you are the boy who gathers dung with your hands. Is that true?"

More shame. "Sir, yes, it is true. I can collect more and take it to my hiding places to dry more quickly if I do. I ... I am sorry."

Gamaliel asked, "Do you not know that Torah commands us to keep clean?"

"Sir, yes, I do. I am sorry."

"Well, we must help you follow Torah. Do you see that bowl, by the gateway? That is where we put the water we have used to wash our hands and feet before we eat our meal in the evening. I want you to come by my house every day when you are done collecting fuel, and I want you to wash your hands and feet as Torah commands. Can you do that?"

“Sir, yes ... yes I can and I will.”

“Good. I know you get enough bread to eat, but look next to the bowl and you might find a plate of vegetables, and perhaps a bit of goat on the Sabbath. You are welcome to those too. But only after you have washed your hands!”

“Sir, I thank you. This is a great mitzvah, and I pray that God will bless you ten times over for it.”

“Now, Abiyima’el, how do you get your fuel to the bakers?”

It is surprising how quickly the shame returns even in the face of the rabbi’s great gift. “Well, sir, I carry it in a bag on my shoulder and put the pieces in the ovens for them so that their hands are not soiled.”

“We must change that too. In a couple of days, I will have an answer.”

The very next day Abiyima’el stopped at the rabbi’s house and washed his hands and feet, as he had promised. And there was a small plate covered by an old cloth with boiled leek and a bit of mutton. It was a moment of unimaginable joy to someone who had tasted each so rarely that it was like a new experience.

The next day after that, the rabbi greeted him at the house gate, standing next to an odd-looking contraption made of two long sticks of wood.

The rabbi said, “I went to speak with the bakers the other night, and though they call you that dirty name – and the rabbi smiled at the pun he had just made – they are grateful for your hard work, and perhaps after our conversation they felt a little guilty for not paying you your worth.

“So, I suggested they offer amends by making a little contribution, and I had the carpenter in my congregation make you this sled.”

He took the contraption down off the wall and showed Abiyima’el how it worked. Two long sticks were joined together at the foot and spread out, shoulder width, toward the top so that he could drag it behind him. A shelf and a backstop were built in near the base so that the fuel he collected could be moved about on the sled without dropping any.

And then the rabbi smiled such a smile.

“And because you have washed your hands and feet and are cleansed for the day, here is how you will deliver your fuel.”

Again, not a question, but a blessing.

From behind his back, the rabbi produced a stick with a fork on the end – a pitchfork. “You can pick up your lumps of fuel with this and put them in the oven and still be clean. This is what Torah expects of you. Do you understand how important it is for you, for us, to follow Torah?”

Abiyima’el took great relish showing off his contraption, his sled, to the bakers and to the other boys who collected fuel, and because God is good, it wasn’t long before each of them had their own. A large basin of water was set up near the baking ovens, so that all the boys could wash their hands and feet as Torah commands.

Soon the news in Jerusalem was that the bread from Bethlehem was particularly good because even the fuel they used was Kosher, because the boys who collected it were clean. The bakers were then able to charge a little bit more for their loaves, making life just a little more comfortable for everyone in town.

And that news sent rabbis in a dozen other villages scrambling to their texts to see what they could do for their bakers, and their farmers, and the others who produced goods for the market in Jerusalem.

Perhaps a month later, Abiyima’el skipped a day of collecting and sat in the synagogue for a turn to speak to the rabbi.

His question was simple. “Why did you do this for me?”

Gamaliel answered his question with a question. “Do I need a reason to do a mitzvah, a good deed?”

Long moments of silence passed.

The rabbi broke the silence. “Yes, there is a reason for the mitzvah. There were prophets of old who said the messiah, when he comes, will

come from Bethlehem. But there were many prophets, and they said many things, and how are we to know what which are true and which are false?

“Perhaps, however, those prophets were right, and the messiah will come from here. If I do a good deed for you, perhaps you will do a good deed for someone else, and they will do a good deed for someone else, and God will see all of these blessings and send us the chosen one.

“And there have been many blessings in Bethlehem since you learned to wash your hands and feet, to obey Torah.

“Now go; don’t you have work to do to earn your bread?”

So, on that morning of the day we call Christmas, with so much sheep dung so close at hand, Abiyima’el and his counterparts practically sang with joy at the amount of fuel they were able to collect and take to their hiding places to dry.

Abiyima’el, even as a young boy, could judge how long it would take for the fuel to become dry enough to use, and his judgment was that this would take longer than a week -- perhaps almost two weeks.

And as he was loading his sled on the twelfth night, he saw an unusual light in the evening sky, a single star shining more brightly than anything he had ever seen.

Rather than go directly to the ovens, he followed the light of that star to the other side of Bethlehem. Its light was brightest over a camp of men and beasts the likes of which he had never imagined. Several were setting up large tents and others went scouting the grounds for wood or straw or anything suitable for making a campfire to cook their supper.

The men were dressed in robes spangled with stars of silver and gold, and the color of their eyes and skin suggested that they were from places and peoples from far away. And the beasts! Horses he recognized, but the larger ones he didn’t. They seemed in the wondrous light to be magnificent.

He approached deliberately, but cautiously, until he was noticed by a boy handling the reigns of the largest creature he had ever seen.

“What is that?” Abiyima’el asked in the Aramaic which was the common language of commerce in his world.

“That? That’s a camel of course. That’s how we got here from Kandahar so quickly. To see your new king.”

“New king? Do you mean the Messiah?”

“Well, I don’t know what you call him, but my masters saw his star rise as the new King of a new world – a world which will bring heaven and earth together.”

Just then a man of dark skin stepped out into the light of the star and asked Abiyima’el what he wanted. His was not much different than the skin of the dirty boy.

“Sir, I have fuel for your campfire, if you need any.”

As he bent over to look at the contents of the sled, the golden circlet around the man’s forehead shimmered in the starlight, a bright contrast to his richly colored complexion.

“How much?” he asked.

“Sir, I see that you are travelers and strangers to our land. Our law, Torah, says we should treat you as we do our own kin. For you there is no charge. It is a mitzvah, a blessing to give it to you.”

The man drew back, stood up to his full height and thought for a moment. He responded. “I understand now. So, this is why your God has chosen this place and this people to favor with a high and holy king. You, a young boy, have already learned kindness and generosity and faithfulness to your law.

As they spoke, the light of the star began to move again, from directly over the camp to a street nearby. The brightness that had illuminated their conversation now hung over a simple small house with a small shed next door.

The Magus said, "Now, I see the light has drifted over towards that street over there, and is brightest over that house. Tell me, do you know who lives there?"

"Sir, I believe it is the house of Joseph. He is a carpenter. Our rabbi asked him to build this sled for me to bring fuel to the ovens, and today it seemed right to bring some to you."

"A carpenter? Well, no matter. The star has led us faithfully to this place, and tomorrow we shall pay him a visit and inquire as to the king we seek."

"And tomorrow," Abiyima'el thought, looking around at the horses and at the great camel beasts, feeding on the fodder they had brought along with them, "I shall return *here* with my sled."