

SHABBAT SERMON

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The opening chapter of the Book of Daniel briefly sets the scene for what is about to happen to four young men who have been taken as captives into exile in Babylon after the conquest of Jerusalem. They are handpicked from the cream of Israelite society for special education and training to enter royal service in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar in the very heart of the alien empire.

The extraordinary talents and skills of Daniel and his companions are rightly celebrated here. Like a good wisdom storyteller, the author sets up challenging problems that the hero has to overcome through imagination and shrewd calculation.

Soon after their arrival, Daniel wishes to avoid the food provided from the king's table and asks for permission to eat a simpler diet of his own choosing. The overseer is too scared to risk death by challenging a royal decree, a reminder of the pressure and fear that the regime imposes on all the inhabitants. Nevertheless Daniel finds someone lower down in the hierarchy who is willing to take a chance, and, with divine help, he succeeds. So apart from his mastery of the subjects he has been learning, we learn for the first time of the young Daniel's willingness, for his own sake and for that of his companions, to act independently and resist the pressures that would submerge them entirely in their new environment. But also, that in order to get what he wants he is willing to negotiate, manipulate or even risk subverting the system.

The first test of his prowess comes in chapter two when King Nebuchadnezzar has a terrifying dream. The various magicians and fortune tellers of the court cannot explain its meaning for the simple reason that the king is not even prepared to tell them the content of the dream that so disturbed him. Perhaps he does so out of a perverse satisfaction at testing or shaming them, or because he simply could not remember it and is both desperate and too embarrassed to acknowledge this. When the whole apparatus of those who advise the king is threatened with instant death, Daniel finds himself and his companions included, and he is forced to act. From the outset he is shrewd enough, or generous enough, to realise that he must do so on behalf not only of himself but of the whole retinue of advisers who are at risk. For the first time he steps onto a broader stage, and though he creates friends this way he also exposes himself and his companions to the jealousies and rivalries that are also inevitable in such a system and will put them at serious risk for the rest of their lives.

Daniel's first step is to replace the chaos of the king's irrational behaviour with some kind of personal control of the situation. He uses the access he has to the king, who had tested and admired the companions at the end of their training. He asks for a delay while he seeks a solution through the spiritual resources that only he has access to, but which are certain to solve the problem set by the king. So, effectively, he takes charge and thereby establishes his authority as the one person

who is able to provide the answers the king needs beyond the capabilities of all the other experts. The author tells us that through his prayers with his colleagues to the God of heaven, a title of Israel's God that will be used eight times in the book, he learns the secret of the king's dream. When he stands before the king, he is quick to establish that he has a different, unique source of authority for what he is about to tell him, thus distancing himself from the rest of the advisers and establishing his unique role as a special confidant to the king. Provided, of course, the king accepts his understanding of the dream.

I would like to suggest that despite the summoning of divine powers that Daniel claims provided the necessary information about the dream, what follows may also be based on his own intellectual skills. He had at his disposal the application of basic psychology, common sense and a knowledge of the culture and values of the royal court. We know that it is now only the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, so that this transitional period into power is the likely cause of his anxiety. Step by step Daniel leads the king through a detailed explanation of the source of his knowledge, describes the image that was revealed to him and what happened to it, presumably reading the response of the king at each carefully outlined stage. He then announces that he will give the interpretation. But before doing so he flatters Nebuchadnezzar as 'king of kings' to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom. Assuming that the king is still insecure in his new role, Daniel assures him that the head of Gold in his dream represents his own significant self, and that all the subsequent body parts in increasingly inferior materials are different future generations of rulers that in no way match up to the power and authority of Nebuchadnezzar himself. So Daniel convinces the king that his rule is secure, now and well into the future, and that any problems that might threaten his authority and power belong to distant generations about which he need have no concern.

By this mixture of extravagant flattery and reassurance, mixed with a supernatural source of his knowledge, Daniel convinces the king that this was indeed his forgotten dream. This would have been a risky strategy, presumably built upon imagery already available to Daniel from his immersion in Babylonian culture. But given Daniel's gifts of persuasion and the authority he claimed for himself, it was a brilliant psychological reading of exactly what the king would want to hear. That was Daniel's unique skill in dealing with the irrational arbitrariness of the king, and established his authority with the king for all future interpretations.

So when it came to the second dream Daniel was in a good place to provide an acceptable interpretation. It is unclear whether Nebuchadnezzar's advisers were unable to interpret his dream, or, recognizing the distress it caused the king, were reluctant to try to interpret it because of the personal risk to themselves if he did not like what they had to say. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar's dream the tree clearly represented himself in his full power and glory, but with an image as a benign and generous leader. Nevertheless, the king seemed to have intuited some kind of personal flaw and possible disaster ahead that had entered his dreams. Daniel too was personally worried by what the dream contained and implied. But by now there was a degree of empathy between them, and Daniel was prepared to reveal that some fall or collapse would happen to the king, but that a restoration would happen as well. Having delivered the meaning, for the first time Daniel drew upon his own Jewish traditional teachings about the power of repentance and offered a different kind of spiritual advice: that the king acknowledge his abuses of power and other sins by giving charity and showing mercy to the poor (Daniel 4:24). Nebuchadnezzar's stubbornness and arrogance prevented him heeding Daniel's advice which he offered in the name of the God Most High. So the king went through the seven years of suffering, but on his recovery, he could make public acknowledgement of the truth of Daniel's teaching and the power of God Most High.

Daniel's story will continue into the next generation of kings and even into the successive Empire that will replace Babylon. His powers remained intact and he continued to face threats to his life in his service of powerful rulers secure in his trust in God.

The rabbis were right in their cautionary advice.

Be careful [in your dealings] with the ruling authorities for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by a man in the hour of his distress. *Pirke Avot 2:3*

And yet Daniel is a reminder that there are many kinds of religious vocation and that some are called to speak truth to power, May Daniel's wisdom and Daniel's God accompany them whenever they undertake that dangerous journey

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