

16. Five homeless Jews in a huddle

DANIEL RETURNED FROM Nippur on the day before his friends' trial. Azariah had gotten word of the prophet's plans so he, Mishael and Hananiah were waiting in his garden when Daniel arrived at home. The prophet dismounted, stepped past them into the house without speaking then washed his hands before offering a smile.

"How are you my dear friends?" he asked. "Frightened, Mishael? Disillusioned, Hananiah?" He turned to Azariah. "And you, of course, are angry."

Despite their anxiety, Daniel's accuracy made his friends laugh. Daniel looked each in the eye before continuing. "My brothers," he said, "can we set aside hurt feelings for a moment and simply agree that you three are in a perilous spot?" He waited until each nodded. "Good, now of a mind, let's use the speck of time available to us to discuss how you might handle your problem."

Azariah had come to accuse Daniel, not to be charmed, but the prophet had disarmed him. He followed the others to the dining room and sat with them at the table. Pnina served hot broth. While at it, the old women opened her mouth to speak but Daniel lifted a finger in an unmistakable sign, refusing to hear a word.

"If the king really wished to kill us," Azariah began, "he would have had us arrested immediately, thrown us into a furnace and moved on."

"Obviously, he wants to talk," Mishael said, "and that must be a good sign."

"Yes, and no," Daniel said. "Philosir has set a keen trap. The king may truly wish to wiggle out from under this but he has absolutely no leeway under the law. I'm afraid you men will need to make a choice."

They stared at him, waiting.

"Dishonor God," Daniel said, "or die."

"That's it?" Azariah asked. "Not even a pep talk today from our good friend, the prophet? All we get after you run away and hide is a fatal choice and best wishes?"

"Correct," Daniel said. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you recommend, O wise one?" Azariah asked.

"It's not my choice," Daniel said, "but, if asked, I would advise you to select the fire."

Azariah began to shake with anger, he couldn't help it. During all their years together Daniel had been the good, the strong, the upright fellow. Never had he flinched or run from danger. "You advise us," he asked, "to allow ourselves to be killed?"

"It would happen at the big new brick, monument and institutional paver plant east of town," Daniel said, "the only one with an opening large enough to accommodate the bodies of fully grown men."

"The one that fired the new lion statues?" Mishael asked. "Those that flank the pagan temple stairs?"

"The same," Daniel said. "It's quite an appliance."

“Stop this foolish talk!” Azariah said. “Brother,” he said, “I can understand Mishael’s boyish meandering but how can you, Daniel, be so casual about our end?”

They listened to birds chirping outside, in the garden, for quite a while before Daniel cleared his throat to speak. “You have to mind,” he said, whispering, “that none of this is real.”

His friends went blank. Pnina grumbled from her listening post in the kitchen, having stooped and hidden from sight behind the open door.

“God abides in heaven,” Daniel said. “We pray to him. His Spirit comforts us when we are deserving yet we do not see him. Only the Spirit may teach us the true meaning of an event in its hour.”

“That makes no sense,” Hananiah sighed.

“Just tell us, Daniel,” Azariah said, “will we live or die?”

“Time is not, as it seems, an arrow in flight,” Daniel answered, “but a static thing that can, on occasions, be manipulated back to front, front to back, as it suits God’s will.”

“All my life I have prayed nearly as often and fervently as you, Daniel,” Hananiah said, “and yet I have no idea what any of that means.”

Daniel sat peacefully and waited.

“You are not suggesting...” Azariah’s voice dropped to a whisper. “...that we might... survive?”

“We stand on a ship’s bow,” Daniel said, “plowing through the apparent turbulent sea of time. But through faith and supplication we begin to realize that the ship stands still and the ocean only appears to fly by! We are not trapped on that ship nor bound to travel its course.”

“You see the future?” Mishael asked. “Our future?”

“Some is accessible,” Daniel said. “I do not completely understand.”

“You truly, truly are a prophet then?” Azariah whispered.

Hananiah stood. “What became of our mothers and fathers?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” Daniel said, looking away.

“Please,” Hananiah pleaded.

Daniel’s eyes welled with tears. “They’re long dead,” he whispered, “murdered all.”

They stood beside the dining table and hugged in a sad exilic huddle while Pnina sobbed softly in the kitchen. Then Azariah pushed back. “Must every Jew die to satisfy the Lord?”

“No,” Daniel said brightly, “he has promised some will not.”

“Some? Some is not nearly enough, Daniel,” Azariah answered, heading for the door. “I will not be sacrificed to a golden caricature erected in honor of a madman. I’m running.”

“He led us out of Egypt,” Daniel said. “The Lord marched before us in the desert and also served as our rear guard. He favored us, protected us, loved us, fashioned a covenant, magnified us and gave us his living Word.”

“So?” Azariah challenged.

“So, all he ever asked in return from us, his chosen people, was that we would revere and obey him only. But we desecrated the Sabbath. We worshipped the work of our hands. We murdered babies, short-changed widows, abused orphans and consorted with whores.”

“I never did any of that,” Azariah said.

“Yet every Jew pays, according to a mystery,” Daniel surprised them by shouting, “as he warned us through Moses we would.”

“I am through paying and praying,” Azariah said. “I’ll run to Egypt, to Moab, I don’t care. Babylon can kill me when they catch me but I will not lie down for the butcher king who murdered my family. Think, friends! Nebuchadnezzar murdered all our families and we sit and serve his interests like fools. I will not let him incinerate me like so much trash.” He stood at the door and asked, “Mishael and Hananiah, are you coming?”

They stood still.

“You’re not considering submitting?” he said.

“Submitting to our God,” Daniel said, “not to the king of Babylon.”

“Come with me, my friends,” Azariah moaned. “We’ll fight them and die like men.”

“What will happen tomorrow, Daniel,” Hananiah asked, “if we appear before the king?”

“He doesn’t know everything!” Azariah shouted. “Why does he always ask about Ahiel’s little daughter if he understood anything except blind faith in God, who seems amused at best that we’ve suffered so on his behalf.”

“Truly, I do not know Ya’el’s fate,” Daniel admitted, “nor do I know what will happen to you, dear friends, if you oppose the king.” He continued with clenched fists. “But I do know that the God of Israel lives. I know that without him none of this fraud called life makes sense. All is a mystery. All is in his hands. Sweet Ya’el may yet live and you too, brothers, in his merciful hands, may also survive, even in a fire.”

Azariah fell to his knees. “Who in this cold universe has that kind of faith?” he pleaded.

“You do, my friend,” Daniel said.

That seemed to stun everyone, especially Azariah.

“Though we are at constant war with him,” Daniel began again, much more softly, “Satan is helpless in the end. Our fates abide in God’s mind. They have resided so, securely, since before the beginning of time. We prove nothing to God by our choices. We simply discover who we are.”

“Oh, dear God,” Azariah moaned. “Please, Daniel, how can you expect us to test physics itself?”

“I’m afraid it is the Lord, God, who expects it,” Daniel said, “not I.”

It was too much. Azariah rose again and opened the door. This time Hananiah and Mishael joined him. "Better to die by Nebuchadnezzar's arrows than allow him to burn us alive," Azariah said. But they paused at the threshold not quite able to go.

"I love you, brothers," Daniel said, waving goodbye.

"Come with us," Azariah pleaded from the threshold, "before they kill you too."

Daniel, full of peace, remained where he stood.

Mishael began to sob. Hananiah joined him. Then Azariah and Daniel wept with them as the three stepped back inside, hugged one another and dropped to the floor to pray again most desperately. Pnina hurried in from her eavesdropping post in the kitchen and joined them on the floor, groaning as she fell to her knees.

Five homeless Jews in a huddle, sobbing.

"O God," Daniel prayed, "O dear God in heaven, though none of us are worthy, give us peace and please, O please, save all your people from the fire."

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Daniel could not pierce the veil. He could not guarantee his friends' safety. It was clear to Azariah that, in his heart, Daniel truly believed that their best course of action was to submit to test Nebuchadnezzar's furnace's flames. But Azariah could not imagine such courage. As cold evening air spilled in through Daniel's open windows and crossed the floor to where the five of them had remained all afternoon on their knees, praying, the house grew darker.

"Tell us what to do now, brother," Azariah sighed, much too drained by then to fear what Daniel might say. "Just say it and it shall be."

"Only you can say," Daniel said.

Azariah frowned, but Mishael chuckled so oddly that his friends turned to peer at him in the failing light.

"Our course is clear as can be," he said with a big, stupid grin.

Pnina felt his forehead, checking for fever.

"We shall go to the king," Mishael said, "and joyfully refuse to bow to his filthy idol." He smiled again, no hint of concern on his sweet round face, and added, "It's as simple as that."

"You are giddy," Azariah said. "Maybe something to eat?"

"Can't you see it?" Hananiah said. "He's not unhinged at all, he's...brave."

Mishael was a coward.

"You must expect that we'll avoid our fates somehow," Azariah said.

"Nope," Mishael said, "into the furnace we'll go."

"The Comforter has found him," Daniel whispered.

"I too see a miracle in his eyes," Pnina added.

"Wonderful," Azariah said. "Mishael will be at ease when we burst into flames."

"My spirit says we'll survive," Mishael countered, jumping to his feet all enthused. "My spirit says that God himself will perform a shocking, mighty miracle for our protection and the Lord's glory. But let's burn, brothers... Let's go up in smoke

together if that should be his will. Let's rejoice in obedience rather than bow to that filthy abomination on the plain."

Azariah's shoulders sagged. His eyes filled with tears. Mishael's courage had shamed him. Pnina struggled to her feet and stepped so close to Mishael that their noses nearly touched. "Something has definitely changed in there," she whispered, peering into his eyes.

"We will all be changed soon, sister," Mishael said, startling old Pnina with a hug.

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They set off to meet the king for judgment on a cloudless day. People waved to them on the streets as they passed. "What wonderful times we had as small boys in Jerusalem," Hananiah said as they neared the citadel. "It rained at the proper times, Josiah ruled fairly and we lived in safe, warm homes."

"The whole world seemed bright then," Mishael added.

"Indeed," Azariah said, "those were some wonderful months."

"Do you enjoy being sour?" Hananiah asked. "Do you wish even to die bitterly?"

"We're not going to die," Mishael chirped, but he was still flushed with faith.

At the palace, servants assisted while they washed then led them to the king. "I have cleared this chamber for your trial," Nebuchadnezzar said. "No one will observe us or hear what we say."

"A good sign!" Mishael whispered. Azariah patted his head.

Sitting in a plush, cushioned judgment seat in the middle of a windowless hall, the king got right to business. "You're the best advisors I've ever had short of Belteshazzar," he said, "and I'd like you to reconsider." He stood and began to pace, adding emphasis with his hands. "Consider, gentlemen, with a simple gesture on your part we can get past this worship matter and everyone will win. So..." He frowned for a moment, thinking. "I'll make a show for the council by agreeing with Philosir and the priest that, of course, no problem, I'm on board. But then I will point out that you boys have the lawful right to be tested. It's on the books. I checked. Are you with me so far?"

The boys waited, saying nothing.

"So business calls you to Dura," the king said, "and the music plays and everybody turns to see if you guys will bow. And you do! That's your test, but you hardly bow at all. The gesture I have in mind for you fellows would not even qualify as a curtsy, much less a supplication. You see?" He bent a notch at the knee to demonstrate the recommended move then he smiled like a child.

"I'll be there, prearranged. You flex, I nod then say loudly, that looks very good to me." He straightened and glared at them to demonstrate his most threatening king's eye. "Who in Babylon would have the bladder to challenge me?"

"That's it?" Azariah asked. "That's all we do?"

"Yes," the king said, "and this unpleasantness is finished for all time! Surely your god won't mind a wink and a nod to save your skins?" He grinned again. "There'll be no need to even avert your eyes! You just twitch, like this..." He acted out a ridiculous scene, walking, stopping and then pretending to hear music play. With one

hand behind an ear he quick-dipped at the knee. “Even if you don’t tilt a mite but just turn your heads,” he laughed, “I will say that you did! How’s that? Enshunu and his hacks can complain but what can they do? Not a thing; the truth will be what I shall say it is. Does my offer not meet you boys more than half way?”

It sounded great to Azariah but Mishael spoke a truth that shamed him.

“O Nebuchadnezzar,” Mishael said, “if we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it and he will rescue us from your hand. But even if he does not we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you set up.”

How had frightened little Mishael become such a man?

Of course the king exploded. He cursed them in Aramaic and the coastal tongue then finished them off in Akkadian using words they had never heard before after all their training. “You boys are ungrateful, unpatriotic, dangerous, irresponsible, ill-bred and despicable in my eyes,” he finished.

But something about the king’s tantrum lifted Azariah’s spirits. The mounting rant quickly became so comical that Azariah avoided peeking at his friends for fear he might laugh in his face. Midway through the tirade the queen stepped into the chamber and, hearing him, applauded.

“I say,” Queen Amytis said, “quit talking and burn them now.”

Amytis had never been a fan.

Nebuchadnezzar called his guards.

“Take these ingrates to the new furnace outside the east gate,” he said.

Mishael smiled, pleased that Daniel had been right about the venue.

“Have the master stoke it seven times hotter than normal. When I arrive we’ll pitch them in but don’t dare start without me. I want to watch them fry.”

Technically, in the absence of cooking oil, they were to be broiled or baked.

Guards grabbed them at once. On their way out, the king’s younger daughter, little Kasšaya, ran past them barefoot in the hall, her hair falling in tight black curls aside her creamy child’s cheeks. A small, jewel-encrusted cylinder seal bounced against her chest as she hopped in place. “Where are you taking Daddy’s Hebrews?” she asked. Then she ran off, calling out to her brother, “Amel, Amel, Abednego and Daddy’s other Jews are in trouble. Come see.”

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The guards hustled them down the palace steps to the citadel gates and onto waiting chariots. As they sped toward the brickyard the boys were amazingly calm. A gift from God, Azariah’s spirit had soared after making his choice; faith before Babylon. When they arrived at the site they were led straight to the oven. Several yardmen were already at work beside it erecting a gangplank for their execution. The yard boss labored hard at boosting the fire but the specter of roaring flames only heightened Azariah’s growing sense of peace.

“How can you be certain it will be exactly seven times hotter?” he asked playfully. The furnace master turned and spit at Azariah’s feet. “What if it’s nine times

hotter or only three?” Azariah pried on. “Could that amount to an issue between you and the king?”

“I’ve no time for this foolishness, Jew,” the master muttered. “He should off your heads, plant them on pikes and be done with you. Hot or cold he’ll expect a full quota of pavers from me, not a brick less today, though he’s gobbled up half the day and will waste tons of fuel for this show. That’s royalty for you.”

“Quiet, there,” a king’s man snarled but the yard master spit at his feet too.

“I’ve brought seven times the normal charge to feed the flames,” the old man told Azariah, “and enlisted witnesses to note that this big can—he pointed toward the furnace—is blazing hot. If that won’t satisfy the king he can make his own arrangements. He’s done so before.”

None of that mattered. Not only were Azariah and his friends unafraid, they were cloaked in a kind of sweet-smelling ecstasy, prepared, even anxious to die for their faith. The brighter side of moving on, Azariah figured, was the certainty that his family would be well-cared for and that, after his loved ones, he stood only to lose Babylon, an unholy heap of idolaters, sensualists, murderers, short-changers, false witnesses and thieves.

Not much unlike Judah at the end.

“But we are not going to die,” Mishael insisted.

Soon the heat from the flames forced everyone back. Mishael and Hananiah seemed so eager to burn it disturbed the guards. The king had not yet arrived so the soldiers led them back to a cooler spot, beside weathered bins where the air reeked of sharp chemicals, stacks of baked bricks, mounds of colored sand, mud, reeds, chinks, crystals and salts. Up front, workers set the incline in place at the furnace mouth while the master shouted oaths and stoked the fire more.

“Seven times hotter,” they heard him complain. “How, by Marduk, would I know?”

While he worked the flames grew brighter, hotter and even louder, like a howling desert wind. Azariah began to worry that he might lose his nerve. “Pitch us in now, fellows?” he asked, but the guards refused.

“The king,” one told him, “really wants to see this.”