Herod the Builder – Handout

# Babylonian Talmud - Bava Batra 3b-4a

## Part 1 – Origin – Plan A

Herod was the slave of the Hasmonean house, and had set his eyes on a certain maiden. One day he heard a voice say, ‘Every slave that rebels now will succeed.’

## Part 2 – Origin – Plan B

So he rose and killed all the members of his master's household, but spared that maiden. When she saw that he wanted to marry her, she went up on to a roof and cried out, ‘Whoever comes and says, I am from the Hasmonean house, is a slave, for only that maiden was left of them, and she jumped and died.’ He preserved her in honey for seven years.

Some say that he had sex with her, others that he did not have sex with her.

According to those who say that he had sex with her, his reason for embalming her was to gratify his desires.

According to those who say that he did not have sex with her – why did he do that? So as to send forth a rumor (voice) that he took in marriage the daughter of a king.

## Part 3 – The Massacre

Who are they, he said, who teach, *Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; [you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman] (Deut 17:15)*? The Rabbis! He therefore arose and killed all the Rabbis, sparing, however, Baba b. Buta, that he might take counsel of him. He placed on his head a garland of hedgehog bristles and put out his eyes.

## Part 4 – The Test

One day he came and sat before him.

He said: “See, Sir, what this wicked slave does?” He said to him “What do you want me to do to him?”

He said: “Curse him”. He said to him, “It is written, *Don’t revile a king even among your intimates (Qoh 10:20*).”

Said Herod to him: “That applies to kings; but that one is no king”. He replied: “*Don’t revile a rich man even in your bedchamber (Qoh 10:2)*. And even if he is only a noble, as is written, *Do not put a curse upon a noble among your people (Exod 22:27).*”

He said to him: This applies only to one who acts as one of ‘your people’, but this man does not act as one of ‘your people’. He said: I am afraid lest there be another man who would hear something and go and inform him.”

He said to him, “There is no one who can go and tell him, since we two are quite alone. He replied: “*For a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report the word (Qoh 10:20)*.”

He said to him, “I am he”. Had I known that the Rabbis were so discrete, l should not have killed them.

## Part 5 - Light

Now tell me what amends I can make.

He replied: “As you have extinguished the light of the world, go now and attend to the light of the world”.

“He extinguished the light of the world” as it is written, “*For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah a light (Prov 6:23).”*

“Go now and attend to the light of the world”; it is written, “*And all the nations become enlightened by it (Isa 2:2)*”.

Some report that he answered him thus: “As you have extinguished the eye of the world, go now and attend to the eye of the world”.

“As you have extinguished the eye of the world” - the Sages, as is written, “*If this was not known to the eyes of the congregation (Num 15:24).“*

*“G*o now and attend to the eye of the world” – world - the temple, as is written, “*I am going to desecrate my sanctuary, your pride and glory, the delight of your eyes (Ezek 24:21)*.”

## Part 6 – Romans I

He said to him: I am afraid of the kingdom of Rome.

He said: Send an envoy, and let him take a year on the way and stay in Rome a year and take a year coming back, and in the meantime you can pull it down and rebuild it.

## Part 7 – Romans 2

He did so. They sent to him: If you have not yet pulled it down, do not pull it down; if you have pulled it down, do not rebuild it; if you have pulled it down and already rebuilt it, you are one of those bad servants who do first and ask permission afterwards.

Although your weapons are with you, your book [of genealogy] is here. You are not a king [*rekha*], nor the son of a king [*bar rekha*], but Herod, a slave, who made himself a freeman.

## Appendix 1 - Rekha

How do we know that this word “*rekha* [rex]” is the language of kingship? As is written, *I am weak* (rakh) *even though appointed king (2 Sam 3:39)*.

And some say [from here], *And they cried before him Avrekh (Gen 41:43)*, and we translate [in the Aramaic Targum], *Father of the king*.

## Appendix 2 – Beauty of the Temple

They said: He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building. Of what did he build it? Of yellow and white marble. Some say, of blue, yellow and white marble. Alternate rows projected, so it could be plastered. He thought to cover it with gold. The Sages said to him, “Leave it alone, as it is more beautiful thus, as it looks like the waves of water”.

