

Approaching the Eye of the Needle

THERE WAS A GATE IN OLD JERUSALEM near the South Wall called the “Eye of the Needle.” So narrow was this passageway that a camel laden with cargo could not pass through. This left the camel driver with limited options—all of them less than ideal and all of them requiring a man of some particular skill or virtue.

One of the options was to unburden the camel to get it through. This meant minutes or hours of untying straps, loosening ropes, lowering the cargo to the ground, leading the camel through the narrow archway, carrying the cargo through, and then reloading the cargo on the camel’s back. Such a tedious and arduous endeavor required someone who was strong, patient, and organized.

Another alternative was to get rid of some of the cargo, much like a sea captain ordering ballast removed from a ship to keep it from sinking. Enterprising businessmen would often situate themselves near this passageway and haggle away some of the cargo at a fraction of its value. Others made a lively and lucrative business as porters. And then, there were the thieves—mostly poor children or teens—who would snatch a portion of the cargo and run off undetected and usually undeterred into the busy marketplaces beyond the gate. Seldom did the businessmen stationed at this gate lift a finger to help—they wanted the miserly camel drivers to learn that it was better to hire porters or to sell some of their cargo at bargain prices than to lose it altogether. Choosing this option to pass through the gate required an individual who was wise in the ways of the world.

Opposite:
Paul Klee.
The Idea of the Towers.
Pen and ink and
watercolor on paper,
8½ x 6 in., 1918.
Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto. Gift of Sam
and Ayala Zacks, 1970.

Another option, which was far from ideal, was to try one of the other gates into the walled city. These gates provided their own kind of nuisance for it was at these gates that a toll was charged for entry, and, worse yet, there were Roman soldiers stationed there with the expressed purpose of inspecting cargo for contraband. As the conquering occupiers of Jerusalem at that time, the Romans had little respect for the native people. They searched cargoes with impunity, often taking what they wanted without recompense or reason. Sometimes they charged a higher toll on a whim or, worse yet, confiscated the whole cargo simply by declaring it contraband. The unwise or unfortunate trader or traveller who tried one of these gates could then be detained indefinitely without rhyme or reason. This option was not one that any of them favored, but for those who did, it required cleverness, cunning, and more than a little bit of luck.

The last option, which really was no option at all, was to go back to where one came from. Who, after travelling so far, enduring such an arduous journey and all the hardships it entailed, would get so close, only to turn around and go back?

When a first-century prophet named Jesus ben Joseph preached that it was “easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” every listener who had been to Jerusalem knew exactly what he was talking about. It was possible for a rich man to gain entrance to the kingdom, though difficult and often fraught with danger. It took a man who was both clever and cunning, prudent and persistent, wise and worldly—a man who knew that the difference between heaven and hell was often just knowing what to hold on to and what to let go.

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