

# Masters of the Mishnah Part 2 Winds of War: Rabbi Akiva and the Bar Kokhba Revolt

## Other Centers: Lod and Bnei Brak

Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: The Sages who discussed this issue counted the votes of those assembled and concluded in the upper story of the house of Nitza in the city of Lod: With regard to all other transgressions in the Torah, if a person is told: Transgress this prohibition and you will not be killed, he may transgress that prohibition and not be killed, except for those of idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed. (Sanhedrin 74)

It happened once [on Pesach] that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak and were telling the story of the exodus from Egypt that whole night, until their students came and said to them, "The time of [reciting] the morning Shema has arrived." (Passover Haggadah)

Rabbi Simlai came before Rabbi Yoḥanan. He said to him: Would the Master teach me the Book of Genealogies? The Book of Genealogies was a collection of tannaitic teachings that formed a midrash on the book of Chronicles. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Where are you from? He said to him: From Lod. Rabbi Yoḥanan further asked: And where is your present place of residence? He said to him: In Neharde'a. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I have a tradition that we teach these subjects neither to Lodites nor to Neharde'ans, and certainly not to you who comes from Lod and your residence is in Neharde'a (Pesachim 62)

## Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah: אשרי יולדתו

There was an incident involving Rabbi Yehoshua bar Ḥananya, a Levite, who went to Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Gudgeda, also a Levite, in order to assist in closing the doors of the Temple. Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Gudgeda said to him: My son, go back, as you are among the singers and not among the gatekeepers. (Arachin 11)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya said: When we would rejoice in the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing of the Water, we did not see sleep in our eyes the entire Festival. How so? In the first hour of the day, the daily morning offering was sacrificed and everyone came to watch. From there they proceeded to engage in prayer in the synagogue; from there, to watch the sacrifice of the additional offerings; from there, to the synagogue to recite the additional prayer. From there they would proceed to the study hall to study Torah; from there to the eating and drinking in the *sukka*; from there to the afternoon prayer. From there they would proceed to the daily afternoon offering in the Temple. From this point forward,

they proceeded to the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing of the Water.  
(Sukkah 53)

## Know What to Answer (to the Romans)

The Sages taught: The wise people of Alexandria asked twelve matters of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hinnana. Three of them were matters of wisdom, three were matters of *aggada*, three were matters of ignorance, and three were matters of behavior. (Nida 69)

The emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya: I wish to see your God. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: You cannot see Him. The emperor said to him: Truly, I wish to see Him. Rabbi Yehoshua went and stood the emperor facing the sun in the season of Tammuz, i.e., summer. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: Look at it. The emperor said to him: I cannot. Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: Now, if with regard to the sun, which is only one of the servants that stand before the Holy One, Blessed be He, you say: I cannot look at it, is it not all the more so with regard to the Divine Presence?(Hullin 59)

The daughter of the emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya: You are the epitome of magnificent Torah, but it is stored in an ugly vessel, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya was an unattractive man. He said to her: You may learn the answer to your statement from your father's house. In what container do you place wine? She said to him: In earthenware vessels. He said to her: Is it conceivable that everyone stores their wine in earthenware vessels, and you also store it in earthenware vessels? Is there no distinction between the emperor and ordinary people? You should place your wine in vessels of silver and gold.

She went and placed the wine in vessels of silver and gold, and it spoiled. Rabbi Yehoshua said to her: The same is also true of the Torah. It spoils if it is contained in a handsome person. She asked him: But are there not people who are both good looking and learned in Torah? He said to her: If they were ugly they would be even more learned. (Nedarim 50b)

## And Also to Your Own People

In the days of R. Yehoshua ben Chananiah the evil kingdom (Rome) decreed to rebuild the Temple. Papos and Lulianos (two brothers who were later martyred in Lod) set up tables from Akko to Antioch and supplied the pilgrims from the diaspora with silver, gold and all of their needs. Some Kuthites went [to the emperor] and said, "The king should know that if this rebellious city is built and its walls fortified, they will not pay tribute, poll-tax, or land-tax." He said to them, "What should I do, I have already made the decree?" They said to him, "Send to say to them [that] they either change the place of the Temple or add or remove five ells from it and they will recant on their own." And all of the [Jewish] people was gathered in Beit Rimon. When the king's edict arrived, they began to

cry. They sought to rebel against the king. [The sages] said, "Let a wise man go up to quiet the assembled." They said, "Let R. Yehoshua ben Chananiah go up, as he is learned in the Torah." R. Yehoshua ben Chananiah went up and expounded, "A lion was devouring prey [and] a bone got stuck in its throat. It said, 'I will give a reward to anyone who comes and removes it.' An Egyptian heron with a long beak put his beak into the mouth of the lion and extracted the bone. It said to the lion, 'Give me my reward.' The lion said to it, 'Go and praise yourself, "I went into the mouth of the lion in peace and I came out in peace" - and there is no greater reward than that.' So too, it is enough for us that we entered into this nation in peace and came out in peace"... (Bereshit Rabba 64:10)

## Preparing for Battle

At Jerusalem he founded a city in place of the one which had been razed to the ground, naming it Aelia Capitolina, and on the site of the temple of the god he raised a new temple to Jupiter. This brought on a war of no slight importance nor of brief duration, for the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreign races should be settled in their city and foreign religious rites planted there. So long as Hadrian was close by in Egypt and in Syria they remained quiet, save in so far as they purposely made of poor quality such weapons as they were called upon to furnish, in order that the Romans might reject them and they themselves might thus have the use of them, but when he went farther away, they openly revolted. To be sure, they did not dare try conclusions with the Romans in the open field but they occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed and might meet together unobserved under ground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light. (Dio Cassius (Roman historian, circa 200CE)

## The Dangers of Cave Complexes

A NAIL-STUDED SANDAL: What is the reason? — Said Samuel: It was at the end of the period of persecution. and they [some fugitives] were hiding in a cave. They proclaimed, 'He who would enter, let him enter, but he who would go out, let him not go out.' Now, the sandal of one of them became reversed, so that they thought that one of them had gone out and been seen by the enemies, who would now fall upon them. Thereupon they pressed against each other, and they killed of each other more than their enemies slew of them. (Shabbat 60a)

ת"ש עישינו עלינו בית עישינו עלינו מערה

They set our house on fire and the house became filled with smoke, or: They set our cave on fire to smoke us out, (Yevamot 115a)

## Who Are You Bar Kokhba/Kosba/Koziba?

When Rabbi Akiva beheld Bar Koziba, he exclaimed: " This is the king Messiah!" Rabbi Yohanan ben Torta retorted: "Akiva, grass will grow in your cheeks and he still will not have come!"

Eight thousand trumpeters beseiged Betar where Bar Koziba was located. He had with him two hundred thousand men with an amputated finger. . The Sages sent him the message: " How long will you continue to make the men of Israel blemished?" He asked them: "How else shall they be tested?" They answered: ' Let anyone who cannot uproot a cedar from Lebanon be refused enrollment in your army." He thereupon had two hundred thousand men of each class and when they went forth to battle they cried: " O God, neither help nor discourage us!" . . and what did Bar Koziba do? He would catch the missiles from the enemies' catapults on one of his knees and hurl them back, killing many of the foe. On that account Rabbi Akiva made his remark. (Midrash Eicha Rabba 2:4)

## You are Akiva ben Yosef, whose name has spread from one end of the world to the other? (Yevamot 16)

It is said: Up to the age of forty, he had not yet studied a thing. One time, while standing by the mouth of a well in Lydda, he inquired, "Who hollowed out this stone?" and was told, "Akiva, haven't you read that 'water wears away stone' (Job 14:19)? - it was water falling upon it constantly, day after day."

At that, Rabbi Akiva asked himself: Is my mind harder than this stone? I will go and study at least one section of Torah. He went directly to a schoolhouse, and he and his son began reading from a child's tablet. Rabbi Akiva took hold of one end of the tablet, and his son of the other end. The teacher wrote down alef and bet for him, and he learned them; alef to tav, and he learned them; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He went on studying until he learned the whole Torah.

Then he went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. "My masters," he said, "reveal the sense of Mishnah to me."When they told him one halakhah, he went off to reason with himself. This alef, he wondered, what was it written for? That bet - what was it written for? This teaching - what was it uttered for? He kept coming back, kept inquiring of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, until he reduced his teachers to silence. (Avot deRabbi Natan 6)

He called Rabbi Akiva: a sealed vault. For Rabbi Akiva was like a worker who took his basket and went out to gather. When he found wheat, he put it in his basket. When he found barley, he put it in his basket. When he found spelt, he put it in his basket. When he found beans, he put them in his basket. When he found lentils, he put them in his basket. Then when he came back home, he would separate the wheat into one pile, the barley into one pile, the spelt into one

pile, the beans into one pile, and the lentils into one pile. So it was with Rabbi Akiva. He organized the whole Torah into identifiable categories. (Avot deRabbi Natan 18)

## My Beloved is Mine and I am His

R. Akiva says: "I shall speak of His beauty" — of the praise of the Holy One Blessed be He, who spoke and brought the world into being. The peoples of the world ask Israel (Song of Songs 5:9) "How is your Beloved (different) from the beloved (of all the other nations) that you have thus besworn us? (see Ibid. 8) that you thus die for Him and are thus murdered for Him, viz. (Ibid. 1:3) "alamoth have loved You" — they have loved You "al maveth" ("above death"), and (Psalms 44:23) "for over You we are slain all the day"? You are comely, you are strong. Come and join us. And Israel says to them: Do you know Him? Let us tell you part of His praise (Song of Songs 5:10) "My Beloved is white and ruddy, distinguished among legions." When they hear this, they say to Israel: Let us go with you, viz. (Ibid. 6:1) "Where did your Beloved go, you loveliest among the women? Whither has your Beloved turned? Let us seek Him with you." And Israel says to them (Ibid. 2:16) "My Beloved is mine, and I am His," and (Ibid. 6:3) "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine, who grazes His flock among the lilies." (Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael 15:2)

Once the wicked Government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus b. Judah came and found R. Akiba publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him: Akiba, are you not afraid of the Government? He replied: I will explain to you with a parable. A fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them: From what are you fleeing? They replied: From the nets cast for us by men. He said to them: Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors? They replied: Art thou the one that they call the cleverest of animals? Thou art not clever but foolish. If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die! So it is with us. If such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, For that is thy life and the length of thy days, if we go and neglect it how much worse off we shall be! (Brachot 61b)

## Jews and Romans: The Ultimate Culture Clash

He used to say: Beloved is man for he was created in the image [of God]. Especially beloved is he for it was made known to him that he had been created in the image [of God], as it is said: "for in the image of God He made man" (Genesis 9:6). (Pirkei Avot 3:14)

## Joining the Battle

It was said that R. Akiba had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabbatha to Antipatris; and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect. The world remained desolate until R. Akiba came to our Masters in the South and taught the Torah to them. These were R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Jose, R. Simeon and R. Eleazar b. Shammua; and it was they who revived the Torah at that time. A Tanna taught: All of them died between Passover and Pentecost. R. Hama b. Abba or, it might be said, R. Hiyya b. Abin said: All of them died a cruel death. (Yevamot 62b)

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: my teacher Akiva taught that "a star has come forth from Jacob" (Devarim 24:17) means "kuzba" has come forth from Jacob [kuzba instead of kochav, a reference to Bar Kuzba]. (Yerushalmi Taanit 4:5)

The Sages taught: When Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon went to visit him. Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: Ḥanina my brother, do you not know that this nation has been given reign by a decree from Heaven? The proof is that Rome has destroyed God's Temple, and burned His Sanctuary, and killed His pious ones, and destroyed His best ones, and it still exists. And yet I heard about you that you sit and engage in Torah study, and convene assemblies in public, and have a Torah scroll placed in your lap.

Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon said to him: Heaven will have mercy and protect me. Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said to him: I am saying reasonable matters to you, and you say to me: Heaven will have mercy? I wonder if the Romans will not burn both you and your Torah scroll by fire. (Avoda Zara 18a)

## The Fall of Betar

For three and a half years the Emperor Hadrian surrounded Betar. In the city was Rabbi Elazar of Modiin (haModai) who continually wore sackcloth and fasted, and he used to pray daily: "Lord of the Universe, sit not in judgment today!" so that Hadrian thought of returning home. A Cuthean went and found [Hadrian] and said: "My lord, as long as that old cock wallows in ashes, you will not conquer the city. But wait for me because I will do something that will enable you to subdue it today." He immediately entered the gate of the city where he found Rabbi Elazar standing and praying. He pretended to whisper in the ear of Rabbi Elazar of Modiin. People went and informed Bar Koziba: "Your friend, Rabbi Elazar, wishes to surrender the city to Hadrian." [Bar Koziba] sent and had the Cuthean brought to him and asked: "What did you say to him?" He replied: "If I tell you, the king will kill me and if I do not tell you, you will kill me. It is better that I should kill myself and that the secrets of the government be not divulged."

Bar Koziba was convinced that Rabbi Elazar wanted to surrender the city, so when the latter finished his praying he had him brought into his presence and

asked him: "What did the Cuthean tell you?" He answered: "I do not know what he whispered in my ear, nor did I hear anything, because I was standing in prayer and am unaware of what he said." Bar Koziba flew into a rage, kicked him with his foot, and killed him. . .

Right away, the sins of the people caused Betar to be captured. Bar Koziba was slain and his head taken to Hadrian. "Who killed him?" asked Hadrian. "I did," said a Cuthean. "Bring his body to me," he ordered. He went and found a snake encircling his neck. Hadrian said of this: "If his God had not slain him, who could have overcome him?" (Eichah Rabbah 2:4)

Rab Yehudah reported Samuel as saying in the name of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: "What is signified by the verse, 'Mine eye affects my soul because of all the daughters of the city' (Eichah 3:51)? There were four hundred synagogues in the city of Betar and in every one were four hundred teachers of children and each one had under him four hundred pupils and when the enemy entered there they pierced them with their staves and when the enemy prevailed and captured them they wrapped them in their scrolls and burnt them with fire." (Gittin 58)

## With All Your Soul: Rabbi Akiva's Martyrdom

R. Akiba says: With all thy soul': even if He takes away thy soul . . . When R. Akiba was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, 'with all thy soul', [which I interpret,] 'even if He takes thy soul'. I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfil it? He prolonged the word *ehad* until he expired while saying it. A *bath kol* went forth and proclaimed: Happy art thou, Akiba, that thy soul has departed with the word *ehad*! The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Such Torah, and such a reward? [He should have been] from them that die by Thy hand, O Lord. He replied to them: Their portion is in life. A *bath kol* went forth and proclaimed, Happy art thou, R. Akiba, that thou art destined for the life of the world to come. (Berakhot 61b)

## Heavenly, Not Earthly Jerusalem

Hadrian's Year 18 (AD 134) The Jewish War that was conducted in Palestine reached its conclusion, all Jewish problems having been completely suppressed. From that time on, the permission was denied them even to enter Jerusalem, first and foremost because of the commandment of God as the prophets had prophesied, and secondly by authority of the interdictions of the Romans. (Eusebius of Caesaria 3rd-4th century Christian writer)

## Rabbi Akiva Takes the Long View

And it once was that Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were walking along the road in the Roman Empire, and they heard the sound of the multitudes of Rome . . . . And the other Sages began weeping and Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him: For what reason are you laughing? Rabbi Akiva said to them: And you, for what reason are you weeping? They said to him: These gentiles, who bow to false gods and burn incense to idols, dwell securely and tranquilly in this colossal city, and for us, the House of the footstool of our God, the Temple, is burnt by fire, and shall we not weep? Rabbi Akiva said to them: That is why I am laughing. If for those who violate His will, the wicked, it is so and they are rewarded for the few good deeds they performed, for those who perform His will, all the more so will they be rewarded.

On another occasion they were ascending to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus, they rent their garments. When they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from the site of the Holy of Holies. They began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva was laughing. They said to him: For what reason are you laughing? Rabbi Akiva said to them: For what reason are you weeping? They said to him: This is the place concerning which it is written: “And the non-priest who approaches shall die” (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it; and shall we not weep?

Rabbi Akiva said to them: That is why I am laughing, as it is written: “And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah” (Isaiah 8:2). : Uriah prophesied during the First Temple period, and Zechariah prophesied during the Second Temple. Rather, the verse established that fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah is dependent on fulfillment of the prophecy of Uriah.

In the prophecy of Uriah it is written: “Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest” (Micah 3:12), In Zechariah it is written: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:4). Until the prophecy of Uriah with regard to the destruction of the city was fulfilled I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. The Sages said to him, Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us. (Makkot 24)