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THE EXILE AND RETURN
OF R. SIMEON BAR YOCHAI

ARTHUR LAWRENCE SCHWARTZ

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Advisor: Professor Leonard S. Kravitz

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all my love and appreciation. "Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."

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he has shared with me, this text is dedicated.

Baruch Atta Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam, asher
kid'shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu la'asok b'divrey Torah.

Baruch Atta Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-olam, shehechiyanu,
v'kiyamanu, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh. Amen.

Arthur Lawrence Schwartz
New York, New York
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I R. SIMEON BAR YOCHAI ---- A TANNA

Simeon bar Yochai was one of R. Akiba's most outstanding disciples. As R. Akiba was the leader of his generation, so his students were the leaders in theirs. It is written that early in his life R. Akiba once had twelve thousand pairs of disciples in the North. They covered an area from Gabbatha to Antipatris. Yet, all of them died of a strangulating disease in one short period of time. The reason given for their deaths was rivalry. After the tragedy R. Akiba went to the South and raised up still other disciples. The literature describes these students as those who restored the Torah in their time.

The world remained desolate until R. Akiba came to our Masters in the South and taught them. They were R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Jose, R. Simeon b. Yohai, R. Eleazar b. Shamua, R. Johanan the sandler, and R. Eliezer b. Jacob. Others say: R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, R. Meir, R. Jose, R. Simeon b. Yohai, R. Hannina b. Hakinai, and R. Johanan the cobbler. Said R. Akiba: My sons, the previous ones died only because they begrudged each other... see to it that you do not act thus. They arose and filled the whole of Israel with Torah. Others say: It was they who revived the Torah at that time.¹

When R. Akiba established himself in the town of Bnei Brak, his students joined him. It was there that R. Simeon studied for many years.² In some areas R. Simeon was second only to R. Meir. When the time came for R. Akiba to ordain

his students, he gave preference to R. Meir and ordained him first. R. Simeon was ordained after R. Meir. According to the report, R. Simeon was not pleased by this arrangement. Therefore, R. Akiba is said to have appeased him with the following words: "It is sufficient for you that I and your Creator recognize your power."³

R. Simeon was very close to his teacher and would go to any extent to study with him. He would even risk his life to hear his teacher's words of Torah. In his later years R. Akiba would be thrown into prison. Through the influence of his father Yochai, R. Simeon visited R. Akiba in prison, and there he asked his teacher to instruct him in the Law. This was a dangerous undertaking because the teaching of Torah had been outlawed.

R. Simeon came to R. Akiba, when the latter was incarcerated in prison. 'Teach me torah', he said.

Akiba replied, 'I shall not teach you.'

R. Simeon then said, 'If you do not teach me, I shall tell my father Yochai, and he shall deliver you into the hands of the government.'

R. Akiba then responded, 'As much as the calf wishes to suckle, so too does the cow wish to give suck. And who here is in danger but the calf!' ⁴

R. Simeon went to great extremes not only in seeking instruction but also in studying. There is reason to believe that of all his colleagues, he alone dedicated one hundred percent of his time to the study of the Law.⁵ From his statements, it appears that he believed that all men

should do likewise. In a passage from Berachot there is the following:

R. Simeon b. Yohai says: Is that possible? If a man ploughs in the ploughing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of the wind, what is to become of the Torah? No, but when Israel performs the will of the Omnipresent, their work is performed by others, as it says, And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, etc... 6

This report, which states that R. Simeon denigrated mundane labor, has a parallel to the events which are said to have occurred when R. Simeon and his son left their cave of exile for the first time.

Then Elijah came and stood at the entrance of the cave and exclaimed, Who will inform the son of Yohai that the emperor is dead and his decree annulled?

So they emerged. Seeing a man ploughing and sowing, they exclaimed, 'They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal!'

Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, 'Have ye emerged to destroy my world: Return to your cave!'

R. Simeon's idea that one should have for one's business only the study of the law was not acceptable to the rabbis. In the passage from Berachot R. Simeon's view is condemned. "Many have followed the advice of Ishmael /which is to say they combine the study of the Law with a worldly occupation/ and it has worked well, others have followed R. Simeon b. Yohai and it has not been successful." Moreover, the statement attributed to Elijah, "Have ye emerged to destroy my

world...!" says clearly why the rabbis rejected R. Simeon's view. Such an idea, if followed by a majority, would indeed destroy the social structure. The very existence of the scholar class depended upon the labors of others. If everyone were to give up the plough and run to the study hall, who would be left to support the needs of the scholar class?

Though the rabbis rejected the idea that everyone dedicate his total time to the study of the law, they respected R. Simeon for doing so. He was considered the most pious of men, and it was said that his merit alone preserved the world. Therefore, during his lifetime the rainbow, a sign of God's forbearance, was never seen. And, it was said that if it had been possible for R. Simeon, his son Eleazar, and King Jotham of Judea to combine their spiritual merit, sin and suffering would have been purged from the world.⁸

Having devoted his entire life to the study of the Law, R. Simeon had much to say. The Mishnah and Talmud are filled with his discussions on law. They are found in all the treatises of the Mishnah except Berachot, Hallah, Ta'anit, Nedarim, Tamid, and Middot.

R. Simeon's teaching was for the most part a continuation of R. Akiba's. Once, when talking to his students, he referred to his teaching as the best distillation of R. Akiba's instruction, "אנינו תלמידי מ'אבות' ס' ר' עקיבא."⁹ Behind these words lies another statement, "I am the true disciple of R. Akiba."

R. Simeon was similar to his teacher in taking a liberal constructionist stance toward the Law. Yet, there are some indications that R. Simeon differed in method from his teacher.

Like Akiba, R. Simeon felt that the Torah-Constitution was not written in the language of man. This was significant. If one approached the Torah with R. Ishmael's assumption that it was written in the language of man, there was little possibility for radical change. The text itself, under such a rubric, became a confining straight jacket. This would have been a serious handicap to the leaders of a troubled country where new situations arose every day calling for drastic and creative solutions. In holding that the Torah spoke not in the language of man, R. Simeon was consonant with both Akiba and the needs of his society.

However, the methods employed by R. Akiba, and R. Simeon may have been different. R. Akiba held that nothing in the Torah was superfluous, "not a word, not a syllable, not even a letter. Every peculiarity of diction, every particle, every sign, is to be considered as of higher importance, as having a wider relation and as being of deeper meaning than it seems to have."¹⁰ Thus R. Akiba was able to build new laws upon the most minute letters of the Scripture.

R. Simeon, however, appears to have deviated from this method, at least at times. There are a number of instances

in the Talmud wherein R. Simeon rejected building new laws on the basis of various superfluities of speech found in Scripture.¹¹

There is reason to believe that R. Simeon often approached the law by asking what the "intent" of the scriptural passage was. "As a general rule," he said, "we interpret the Scriptural reason."¹² The rabbis mentioned that when they wanted to know the reason for any passage in the Torah they would ask R. Simeon.¹³

Later in his life R. Simeon was ordained again by another tanna, R. Judah b. Baba. This ordination, however, did not mean that R. Simeon had taken another teacher and had affiliated with another school of thought. Looking at it closely, it seems that this second ordination was a means of transferring top leadership authority from one generation to another. It was not a procedure to admit students into the scholar class because the men ordained were already members.

Toward the end of the war against Rome (132-135) some of R. Akiba's students returned from their exile. They came at a time when all the leaders of the previous generation, except R. Judah b. Baba, had been killed. R. Judah wished to ordain the five returnees as זְרֵי or "Elders." This title did not refer to the age of those to be ordained but rather to their new position of authority. After the transference of authority the five rabbis would be the leading

authorities of the nation.

However, the very act of ordination was a capital crime. Were the Romans to find out about such a procedure they would execute all the people involved and destroy the town in which such a ceremony took place. "What did R. Judah b. Baba do?"¹⁴ He went out into the fields between two large towns, Usha and Shefarim. There in the open fields he ordained five "Elders": R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Simeon, R. Jose, R. Eleazar b. Shamua, and R. Nehemiah.

When the ordination was completed, the Romans happened upon them. R. Judah told the young men to flee, and he stayed to meet the Romans. He was summarily executed. As the last tanna of the previous generation, he had succeeded in maintaining the continuity of the leadership of Israel.

R. Simeon, therefore, was given a very prominent position by this ordination. The authority that he and his colleagues would enjoy was legitimized in this account.

During his life, R. Simeon taught R. Judah HaNasi who later was to become the "Prince" of Israel.¹⁵ Having studied with the greatest of one generation, R. Simeon taught the greatest of the next generation. And, as we shall see, R. Simeon himself was not far from having been the most important man, or at least one of the most important men, of his own generation.

In order to come to that understanding, one must first have an overview of his time and the social forces which shaped it.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Yevamot 62b; B. R. 61; Erel. R. 11;
Nedarim 59a
- 2 Lev. R. 21
- 3 Jer. Sanhedrin 1:19a
- 4 Pesachim 112a
- 5 H. Graetz, History of the Jews, 6 vols.
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society
of America, 1893), vol. 2, p. 441
- 6 Berakot 33b, Soncino trans.
- 7 Jer. Berakot 9:13d, Soncino trans.
- 8 B. R. 35:3; Sukkah 45b
- 9 Gittin 67a
- 10 Jewish Encyclopedia, 1905 ed., s.v.
"Akiba."
- 11 Zevahim 108b; Menahot 11b
- 12 Baba Mezia 115a et al.
- 13 Tosephta Zevahim 1:8
- 14 Sanhedrin 14a
- 15 Shabbat 147b

II THE SEEDS OF HOPE AND DISCONTENT

In the first and second centuries C.E. Judea was a land beset with internecine strife and outright war. To understand the various troubles which afflicted Judea one must first have an appreciation of the various social groups which made up the society. Among the most important were the priests, the Romans, the farmers, the urban proletariat, the early Pharisees, the later Pharisees, and the Zealots. The needs and ideologies of these groups often conflicted with one another, and these conflicts gave rise to major wars against Rome.

From the time of Ezra, if not before, the priests had been the authority figures in the land. Controlling the ideology, they were responsible for the maintenance of the social order. The Temple in Jerusalem was not only the religious heart of the land but also the seat of government.

The constitution of ancient Judea was the Torah. It was the religious, civil, and criminal code of the society. Until the rabbis replaced them, the priests controlled the law. The Torah-Constitution was created for, and functioned well in, an agricultural society. In return for his offerings, which were also his taxes, the farmer expected God to favor him with rain and children, the two elements of wealth in a farming community. Paying his taxes was not a dreary burden.

Three times a year the farmer would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There he would rejoice in the rich pageantry and drama of the festival rites. Such trips were high points in his otherwise monotonous life.

The Torah-Constitution on which the system was based did not in any way encumber the life of the farmer. Its restrictions were not unduly hard. Take, for example, the restriction on fire found in Ex. 35:3, "Ye shall kindle no fire on the Sabbath." For the farmer no fire on the Sabbath was, at most, irksome.

Another restriction placed upon the people by the Torah was the limit of Sabbath travel. In Ex. 16:23 the individual was instructed not to leave his home on the seventh day. "Mark that the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you two days food on the sixth day. Let everyone remain where he is: let no man leave his place on the seventh day." Since the farmer's "place" was a large acreage, he had little need to travel. Therefore, the restriction was not onerous.

Somewhat alien to our understanding today was the taboo system of "uncleanliness." If an individual contracted "uncleanliness," he was obligated to remove himself for a period of time, ritually bathe, and give an offering to the priests, usually two doves.¹ In certain instances the person could pass along his "uncleanliness" to objects and to other

people.² These too, in turn, would then fall under the taboo. "Uncleanliness" was contracted primarily by either having experienced a discharge, or by coming in contact with an "unclean" thing. Among the list of unclean things were dead bodies, creeping things, and lepers. For the farmer the laws of "uncleanliness" were at their worst a minor nuisance. Sometimes he would have to miss a few days work and set aside another pair of doves for the priests.

For the farmer the Torah Law and the Temple Cult were satisfactory. They provided for his basic needs, gave him moments of rich drama and pageantry, and the restrictions imposed by the system were no more than irksome. But, with the takeover of the land by the Romans society changed. A new class arose, an urban proletariat. The needs of this new group were not met by the traditional institutions of Torah Law and Temple Cult.

When the Romans first came to Judea in 64 B.C.E., they found a number of large cities developed by their predecessors, the Seleucids. With over five thousand³ men to quarter and care for, the Romans pressed for the further development of the cities. All cities, especially those with a large number of non-productive elements such as soldiers, require a large craftsman class to provide the necessary services and accouterments of urban life.

Rome's policies in administering the country forced many of the marginal farmers off the land and into the cities. As

Rome tightened her grip upon Judea, she extorted larger and larger tribute. The first to feel the hardship were the small farmers. With additional taxes to pay many lost their farms. These dispossessed then went to the cities in search of a livelihood. Many took up a craft. Others swelled the ranks of the indigent and survived by charity.

Taxes increased because the governor of Judea was expected by his superiors to produce a certain amount of tribute each year. Anything above that figure the governor was allowed to keep for himself. Each governor, in order to accumulate a personal fortune before being removed from office, squeezed as much money as possible out of the Judeans.

The status of the craftsmen was only one step above that of the slaves. Ben Sirah portrayed craftsmen as diligent laborers, necessary to city life, yet boorish and crude.

So every carpenter and workmaster that labored night and day; and they that cut and engrave seals, and are diligent to make great variety and give themselves to counterfeit imagery and watch to finish a work. The smith also, sitting by the anvil, and considering the iron work, the vapor of the fire, wasted his flesh, and he fighteth with the heat of the furnace; the noise of the hammer and the anvil is ever in his ears, and his eyes look still upon the pattern that he makes. He setteth his mind to finish his work, and watcheth to polish it perfectly. So does the potter, sitting at his work and turning the wheel about his feet, is always carefully set at his work by number. He fashioneth the clay with his arm, and boweth down his strength before his feet. He applieth himself to lead it over; and he is diligent to make clean the furnace. All these trust to their hands; and everyone is wise in his work. Without these cannot a city be inhabited; and they shall not dwell where they will, nor go up and down. They shall not be sought on council, nor sit

high in the assembly; they shall not sit on the judge's seat, nor render the sentence of judgment; they cannot declare justice and judgement; and they shall not be found where parables are spoken by the wise. But they understand the work they have wrought, and their thoughts are on the practice of their craft. 4

The transition from the farm to the city was traumatic. Not only was there a loss of social status, but the farmer, now craftsman, also lost much of his former material comfort. His home was now a tiny hovel that also served as his shop. The environment, as in all cities, was dark, dirty, and noisy. A livelihood was difficult to acquire.

In addition, the new urban proletariat faced a conflict with the agrarian law of the priests. Torah Law was not compatible with an urban society. When he was a farmer, a man brought his sacrifices, now as a craftsman, he bought them. The additional steps of selling his craft and then, with the money, purchasing an offering cost him more when, in effect, he had less.

Moreover, the agrarian system of reward in the Torah did not meet the real needs of the artisan class. The Torah and the Temple Cult promised rain and an abundance of children. Neither of these was the reward hoped for by the city dweller.

In the city not only the sacrificial cult but also many of the Torah regulations were seen as a burden. The laws of Sabbath fire, Sabbath travel, and the taboo of "uncleanliness" now caused considerable suffering for the inhabitants of the cities.

The prohibition against Sabbath fire meant for the artisan that he and his family would have to suffer their Sabbath in the dark and damp of their hovel. In winter this was extremely uncomfortable. Nor could a family leave their dwelling. The prohibition against Sabbath travel limited them to their home.

The craftsman faced a further problem with the laws of "uncleanliness." In the city a man was more likely to come in contact with a source of contamination. There was a frightening possibility that he might somehow inadvertently contaminate his tools and materials. This would mean that he would have to destroy his entire stock of goods and his tools. Were this to happen he would be ruined.

Another conflict between the craftsmen and the priests arose in the area of theodicy. The religion of the priests was quite capable of handling the suffering of the farmers. If there was no rain, the community was told to offer more sacrifices, and sooner or later it would rain. When a man complained that his wife was barren, he was told to offer up another sacrifice. Sometimes God answered the request, and sometimes He did not. Now, however, the needs of the urban indigent strained the old theological system. People needed answers for their suffering, for their loss of status, for their inability to lift themselves out of poverty. People needed an answer for the system's failure to provide for them.

But, the priests had no answer. All they could suggest was that one bring still another sacrifice to the Temple. To a man suffering hunger in the city this was no answer. One, he could not afford it. Two, even if he could bring an additional sacrifice it did not alleviate his poverty.

However, a new leadership group arose out of the urban society and challenged the traditional ideology and authority of the priests. This group was originally called the Pharisees. Later they would call themselves rabbis. Their origin remains a matter of debate among scholars. Yet, one can say with some assurance that from the time of Salome Alexander, when the monarch of Judea joined with their party, the rabbis were henceforth in authority. Their laws and their ideology were designed for an urban society. Their very class, a scholar class, was one which could not exist outside an urban environment. One reason for their rise to power was their ability to resolve the anomie of the urban masses with a new ideology.

The Pharisees promulgated a new approach to the Torah-Constitution. According to them, the Torah had a twofold nature. One was the written aspect, the Torah legislation of Moses that had come down to the people in the form of the five books. The other was the oral tradition. This the rabbis said had come down to them from their fathers through a chain of transmission beginning with Moses.⁵ This oral

tradition allowed the Torah-Constitution to be altered via interpretation.

By interpreting the Scripture the rabbis adapted the Law to the new social context of urban life. This made life more bearable for the urban proletariat. For example, by interpreting the word "kindle," the rabbis taught that a person could not begin a new fire on the Sabbath, but one could permit an already existing fire to continue.⁶ This allowed the urban family to have heat during the long cold nights of winter. Moreover, the rabbis commanded the lighting of at least two lamps in the home in honor of the Sabbath day.⁷ This brought light into the dismal dwellings of the poor. In Sabbath practices alone great strides were made to better the lives of the poor.

Previously under the Torah Law one could not leave his dwelling on the Sabbath. The indigent, therefore, were restricted to their hovels. The rabbis, however, created a legal fiction whereby one's "place" could be extended to include the common courtyard, or even an entire city. Under this legal fiction called "eruv"⁸ people were able to leave their homes on Sabbath. The restrictions were no longer a significant hardship.

The rabbis also liberated the craftsman from the most bothersome laws of "uncleanliness." By defining exactly what could contaminate, what could be contaminated, and

how contamination could be transmitted the rabbis limited the scope of the law.¹² Under the rubric of the twofold law, the rabbis taught that a man could contaminate only completed vessels, and then only if he touched them directly in their hollow. This made it almost impossible for a man to contaminate his entire stock of material and/or his tools. Thus, the common man no longer had to worry about someday having to destroy all his goods. The rabbis carried this liberalization even further. Even if a man contaminated a finished vessel he need not destroy it. If the vessel were disassembled and then put together it would be considered "clean." This simple change in the taboo system protected the artisans from possible ruin.

Another new institution of the rabbis was the Mitzvot System. It exalted the common man, and by teaching that every man was his own priest it prepared society for the day when the priesthood would no longer exist. Every deed commanded in the Torah, every "Mitzvah" became a sacrament. For each deed prescribed by the twofold law, a man received a credit in his heavenly account. For each sin he received a debit. After death, God would deal with each person accordingly. Thus one found favor in God's sight not by Temple rites alone, but also by the observance of all the Mitzvot. The slogan "613 Mitzvot of the Torah" meant that there were 613 means to salvation. Since the sacrifices became merely one set of observances among so many, the importance of the Temple Cult

diminished.

The suffering of the masses and their anomic were resolved by another institution called the "Olam Habah," or the World to Come. The idea of a life after death had, perhaps, existed for some time. The rabbis, however, were the ones to develop it. They gave it a grander scope and a greater significance than it had before. Beyond this life was posited another in which God would balance the accounts of everyman. The righteous poor who suffered in this world would be rewarded in the next. Those who were sinners, even the wealthy, would be humbled and punished for their deeds. The problem of theodicy was solved, and at the same time dignity was afforded to the common man. People were to be evaluated, not on the basis of their wealth, but on the basis of their piety and good deeds.

There remained another problem, the salvation of the entire community. The people of Israel had suffered much at the hands of the Romans. Was there not to be some final reckoning for the community? The answer to this question was found in the doctrine of the Messiah, another older concept which the rabbis expanded. The early rabbis during their rise to authority disseminated a revolutionary doctrine of the Messiah, one which expressed the hopes and aspirations of a poor disenfranchised proletariat. The Messianic Age was one in which class positions would be turned upside down.

The evil people of the world, meaning the Romans and the rich, would be vanquished. The righteous poor would then be elevated to new heights. Suffering would cease, healing afforded to all men, peace and prosperity would reign.

Not like this world will be the World to Come. In this world one has the trouble to harvest the grapes and press them: but in the World to Come a person will bring a single grape in a wagon or a ship, store it in the corner of his house, and draw from it enough wine to fill a large flagon, and its stalk will be used as fuel under the pot. There will not be a grape which will not yield thirty measures of wine. ¹⁰

In the Time to Come the land of Israel will grow leaves of the finest flour and garments of the finest wool; and the soil will produce wheat the ears of which will be the size of two kidneys of a large ox. ¹¹

And it shall come to pass when all is accomplished that was to come to pass in those parts, that the Messiah shall begin to be revealed. And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and shall be for food for all that are left. The earth also shall yield its fruit tenthousandfold, and on each vine there shall be a thousand clusters, and each cluster produce a thousand grapes, and each grape a cor of wine. And those who have hungered shall rejoice: moreover they shall behold marvels every day. ¹²

Those who had been formerly exploited would finally be liberated from their oppression, as is seen in this section from Lev. R. 25:8.

While in this world one man builds and another uses it out, one man plants and another eats the fruit, with regard to the Hereafter what is written? 'They shall not build and another inhabit, they shall not plant and another eat.... they shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for calamity'. ¹³

In the days of the Messiah all the poor would be granted Total healing, as we see in the following selection.

The blind will be cured; as it is said, 'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened' (Is. xxv.5).
The lame will be cured; as it is said, 'Then shall the lame man leap as a hart' (ibid. 6). 14

The new age was to be the realization of the good life and the ultimate realization of God's plan for the world. Since a Messianic Age meant that all people would have obtained salvation, any means to salvation such as Temple sacrifice or the Mitzvot would be superfluous. In the restored Temple, for example, there would be no sin offerings, only offerings of praise.

In the 'Olam Habah' all sacrifices will cease except the thanksgiving offering which will never come to an end. 15

Moreover, in Niddah 61b we read that the "commandments are annulled in the Time to Come."

In time the priesthood waned, and the rabbis succeeded the priests as the authorities in the land. When this happened the rabbis ceased being rebels and became the establishment. Then the rabbis were faced with the same problems which had formerly faced the priests, namely a hungry and confused urban proletariat.

There were three sources of economic and spiritual confusion: economic depression, Roman avarice, and the destruction of old religious and national symbols. During the first

century and throughout the second, the economy collapsed. "Unemployment swelled the ranks of the destitute; and in 64 C. E. when the Temple was at last completed more than eighteen thousand laborers were left idle."¹⁶ Poverty was so widespread that an elaborate system of charity had to be developed to provide for the "local indigent, for wayfarers, for the hard pressed even among neighboring non-Jews." ¹⁷

This situation was exacerbated by the Romans. They exhibited a surprising degree of mismanagement. Time and again Rome appointed rapacious governors, whose only aim was to line their own pockets through harsher taxation. As mentioned earlier, this drove many of the smaller farmers off the land and increased the amount of indigents in the cities. Such severe taxation also served to divide the leadership groups of Judea, as they now fought each other in a struggle for survival. The Roman occupation not only caused a severe economic hardship for the country, but it also inflicted deep psychological wounds on the heart of the nation.

The very success of Rome in subjugating the nation destroyed the traditional points of religious and national orientation. Rome's public display of her superior might gave lie to the concept of Israel as God's chosen people. Rome's victory in destroying the people challenged the very deity of the land. The disorientation which resulted, combined with the other social problems, left the masses in a

state of severe anomic.

The new generation of rabbis, now the establishment, was faced with the problem of resolving the plight of the masses. If hunger and anomic were not resolved, they could lead to greater social instability. However, there was little that the rabbis could do. There were no solutions to the very real economic problems. Systems of charity were small measures in light of the magnitude of the economic chaos. Moreover, since the Romans were extorting large amounts of tribute, there was little surplus money to spend on public work projects. The level of employment could not be raised. Therefore, the masses continued to hunger, and social instability increased. Nor could the rabbis offer any greater hope to the masses than they already had in the concept of an "Olam HaBah." Although a group challenging the establishment can afford to raise false hopes, establishment groups never raise the expectations of the poor unnecessarily, as it leads to greater social unrest.

There were some anti-establishment groups in Judea at that time who were holding out to the destitute a hope, perhaps the only hope available. They were saying that the days of the Messiah were not far off. In fact, they suggested those days were imminent. They based this prediction upon the doctrines of the Mitzvot and of the Messiah.

The poor of Judea were experiencing the breakdown of the

Mitzvot System. No matter how pious an individual was, no matter how many mitzvah points he accrued, his real problems of hunger and confusion continued. The Mitzvot System had failed. Some suggested that this was because the Messiah was about to be revealed. Since in the Messianic days there were no Mitzvot, what people were experiencing was the phasing out of the entire Mitzvot System. To us today such a conclusion must seem far fetched, but given the ideological framework of the times such a conclusion was to be expected.

The tenuousness of such a belief did not matter to many of the suffering proletariat. All that mattered to them was that someone was offering them a hope. Nothing else on the horizon promised to alleviate their misery. Many accepted the belief in the imminent coming of the Messiah, because it relieved some of the pain of living. Suffering with hope is always less painful than suffering in despair.

Among those who believed in the apocalyptic vision, some felt that mankind could best hurry the Messiah by purifying themselves. These people went off into the desert and founded communities of the pious. Others believed that the Messianic Advent could be hurried by an attempt to purge society of its evil, which to them meant destroying the Roman tyrants and all who aided them. Groups who held to this militant philosophy were called zealots. They gathered together in bands in the hills. From there they forayed against the Romans. These

insurgent bands were heroes to many. They attracted many followers, not only through their philosophy, but also because of their activities. The zealots provided the disenfranchised with an opportunity for loot and plunder. At the same time the violent activities of these groups provided an outlet for frustration and anger.

Whereas the poor had experienced the failure of the Mitzvot System, and had everything to gain and nothing to lose, they supported the zealot movement. The reverse was true for the establishment. The rabbis and the aristocracy had a significant stake in the status quo. With little to gain and everything to lose, the establishment groups were antagonistic toward the zealot revolutionaries. Yet, when all else failed, it would be necessary for some of the rabbis to join with the zealots.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Lev. 2:7; Num. 19:8-9
- 2 Herbert Danby, trans., The Mishnah (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), Appendix IV
- 3 Solomon Zeitlan, The Rise and Fall of the Judean State (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), vol. II, p. 263
- 4 Ecclesiasticus 38:27-30, quoted in Zeitlan, op. cit., p. 278
- 5 Avot 1:1
- 6 Shabbat 3a
- 7 Shabbat 2:7
- 8 Tractate Eruvim
- 9 Kelim 2:1; 4:1; 5:5; 15:1; 16:4
- 10 Ketubot 111b, quoted in A. Cohen, Everyman's Talmud (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1949), p. 352
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 2 Baruch 43:2
- 13 quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p. 353
- 14 B.R. 45:1, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., pp. 353-354
- 15 Pesikta 79a, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p. 355
- 16 Judah Goldin, "The Period of the Talmud," The Jews: Their History, Louis Finkelstein (ed.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 146
- 17 Ibid., p. 156

III ZEALOTS AND WAR

The nature of the zealot movement provides us with a key for understanding Judea's suicidal attempts at revolt.

Any shrewd observer of the current situation must have realized...the utter impossibility of a puny nation, as was Israel, challenging successfully the might of the Roman empire.... But it was not in their own strength that the Zealots trusted; their trust lay in the God who had so miraculously delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt...and it is likely that...they might have envisioned the intervention of twelve legions of angels.

Josephus called these zealots "brigands."² He claimed that it was they who were responsible for the strife in Judea.

For Judas and Saddok, by introducing and establishing among us a fourth philosophical sect and winning many adherents, immediately filled the land with troubles and planted the roots of the evils that flourished there latter...it has been the support given to it by the youth that has caused the ruin of the land.³

Among the various groups of zealots was a body of guerillas and assassins called the Sicarii. Josephus' description of them provides us with a picture of the trouble they caused.

Toward the end of his Jewish War, in describing Eleazar the leader of the Sicarii,...he /i.e. Josephus/ writes...'For in those days the Sicarii clubbed together against those who consented to submit to Rome and in every way treated them as enemies, plundering their property, rounding up their cattle, and setting fire to their habitations;

protesting that such persons were no other than aliens, who so ignobly sacrificed the hard won liberty of the Jews and admitted their preference for the Roman yoke. Yet, after all, this was but a pretext, put forward by them as a cloak for their cruelty and avarice, as was made plain by their actions.

In the year 70 of the Common Era Zealot fanaticism exploded into war. Unfortunately for Judea, the Messiah and his band of angels failed to appear. Judea was conquered; the Temple destroyed. The zealots who survived fled into the safety of the diaspora. Yet, they did not disappear. They continued to influence the history of Judea.

After Judea's defeat the Zealot message gained greater acceptance among certain elements of Judean society. What greater sign of the "Last Days" could there be than the destruction of God's Holy Temple? Moreover, following the disaster of 70, Judea's social problems were greater than before. The problems of hunger and anomie were only aggravated by the war.

Toward the end of Trajan's reign (98-117), while Rome was engaged in Eastern aggressions, the Parthians and the Armenians rose up against Rome and Greece. The Jews of Egypt, Cyrene, and Cyprus joined these enemies of the Empire. "The spirit of zealotism was not quite dead; driven from Palestine it fanned the flame of insurrection in the Dispersion."⁶

Although allied with the Parthians and the Armenians,

these rebel Jewish communities were no match for Rome.

The Jews fought with the supreme training of all their powers and by the same ruthless methods their opponents had employed against them. Thousands upon thousands of their enemies were put to death. For a time the Jews in Alexandria had the upper hand, but the Greeks soon succeeded in turning them out with much bloodshed. The insurrection was quelled by Trajan's general Turbo; Cyprus was so completely cleared that not a Jew was afterwards permitted to set foot on the Island. But in the rear of the emperor the Jews of Mesopotamia had risen. Against them Trajan dispatched Lusius Quietus, who with barbaric cruelty restored order. How far Palestine itself participated in this Second War (for a war it was) against Rome is uncertain.... The appalling depression of the spirit among Palestinian Jewry may be gauged from the enactment that brides should show their mourning by forbearing to adorn themselves with wreaths. It was also ordained that the study of the Greek language should be forbidden.

After the War of Quietus, Rome continued to press sorely the society. Internal strife continued in Judea. Quietus was sent to Palestine as governor and under his brief reign, "the Synhedrion of Jamnia appears to have been destroyed."⁸ The excesses of Quietus were such that, hearing the pleas of the Jews, the new emperor Hadrian recalled him.

Taking this as an omen, the Jews hoped that the new emperor would be more tolerant and understanding than his predecessors. Since Hadrian had been giving concessions to most of Judea's neighbors, the Jews expected that he would allow them to rebuild their Temple.⁹ Hadrian, however, refused. In fact, he instituted such laws that Judaean

society was thrown into turmoil. Hadrian revived an old law which forbade the mutilation of the body.¹⁰ This was perceived by some Jews as a direct attack upon the practice of circumcision. During this time, whatever hope the Jews had of rebuilding their Temple was shattered by the news that the new emperor was planning to convert Jerusalem into a pagan city.¹¹

While to Hadrian the measures might be no more than an efficient control over Jews, to the Jews they resembled an attempt at the suppression of Judaism. So black was the mood that, were the elementary functions of life subject to reason and absolute control, no new generation would have been brought forth.¹²

Acts of rebellion occurred throughout the land. When the local authorities, i.e. the rabbis, proved unable to handle the situation, Rome declared martial law. All the major symbols of Judean culture were outlawed. Anything which could have served as a rallying point to the Jews was declared illegal. This effectively showed the masses who was in control, and it made it extremely dangerous for anyone to publicly support the old forms of government and ideology.

As soon as the insurrection had become noticeable, an edict was issued forbidding not only circumcision but also the observance of the sabbath, the teaching of the Torah, and the maintenance of the religious organization through ordination.¹³

Many of the groups which had been on the side of peace were thrown into the war party. When Rome suspended the twofold

law, the position of "rabbi" was outlawed. When this position was outlawed, rabbis, whose income and status came only from their position, lost everything they had. With everything to gain and nothing to lose, these men joined the zealots. It was R. Akiba, the greatest figure of his time, who led the rabbis into the war camp.

The leader of the revolt was one Simeon; to the multitudes he was the Messiah. He came indeed to be known as Bar Kokba, son of the star, after the most distinguished Rabbi of the century /i.e. Akiba/ had applied the verse (Num. 24:17), 'There shall step forth a star out of Jacob,' to him....

The war was bitterly fought; it was, to quote the Roman historian, neither 'of slight importance nor of brief duration.' Excellent forces and strategy were required to defeat the rebels, and on both sides the losses were tremendous.... But Severus, whom the emperor had called from Britain to conduct the campaign, was resolute. He was determined to smash the resistance at any cost. Finally in 135, with the fall of Bethar ('from which not a man escaped'), the war was brought to an end. For Hadrian it proved an expensive victory; in communicating with the Senate, for example, he omitted the regular formula 'I and the legions are in health.' Almost all the Jewish settlements in Judea were wiped out. Jerusalem was definitely converted to a pagan city, Jews were forbidden to enter it. Henceforth the city was known as Aelia Capitolina and on the site of the Sanctuary was erected a temple to Capitoline Jupiter. The teaching and practice of Judaism became a capital crime; martyrdom ceased to be rare.... Had Hadrian remained much longer on the throne it is extremely doubtful if Palestinian Jewry could have recovered from the blows. ¹⁴

Says Dio Cassius, 'All Judea was well nigh a desert. Fifty fortresses and nine hundred and eighty-five villages were destroyed; five hundred and eighty thousand men fell in battle, while the number of those who succumbed to their wounds and to famine was never reckoned' (lxix. 14). ¹⁵

The failure of the revolt marked the beginning of the end for Palestinian Jewry. "Steadily after 135 the number of Jewish settlements, even in the Galilee, declined. The refugees to Babylonia were so numerous (and apparently so confident that the Holy land was doomed) that shortly a nephew of Joshua ben Hananiah attempted to establish a court independent of Palestinian authority."¹⁶

Yet, Palestinian Jewry was able to reestablish itself after the war. Admittedly Judea was weaker, but it was still able to maintain its position as a center for world Jewry for another few generations.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 S.G.F. Brandon, Jesus and the Zealots (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), pp. 50-51
- 2 Ibid., 31-32
- 3 Josephus, Antiquities, xviii, 1-10, quoted in Brandon, op. cit. p. 34
- 4 Brandon, op. cit., p. 35-36
- 5 Ibid, p. 56
- 6 Max L. Margolis and Alexander Marx, A History of the Jewish People, (New York: Atheneum, 1972) p.211
- 7 Ibid., p. 211-212
- 8 Graetz, op. cit., Vol II, p. 400
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Margolis and Marx, op. cit., pp. 212 and 213
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Judah Goldin, op. cit., p. 158
- 13 Margolis and Marx, op. cit., p. 216
- 14 Ibid., 158-159
- 15 James Stevenson Riggs, A History of the Jewish People, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1906) p. 281
- 16 Judah Golden, op. cit., p. 158

IV THE END OF A WAR

When the war was over, the mopping up action more or less completed, Rome was ready to withdraw the majority of her troops. The cost of maintaining these troops abroad was tremendous. Moreover, their very presence gave some Judeans an impetus toward further acts of rebellion.

An alternative to martial occupation was found. Rome sought to establish a local government which would be amenable to working for the Romans. The total amount of tribute taken under such an arrangement was less, but the actual receipts were larger, because less was expended for the maintenance of troops.

After Hadrian died and Antoninus Pius came to the throne, the Jews were allowed to reestablish the Synod at Usha.¹ However, they were still prohibited from accepting converts or from entering the Holy city. "Such prohibitions Rome could not abolish without fear for her imperial prestige and security."²

Yet, who among the Judeans could the Romans trust to take over the management of the country? Rome could not support someone who had been an outright enemy. In addition, whomever Rome dealt with would have to have an exorbitant amount of real economic and political power. Such a person would have to have the necessary "weight" to

convince Rome that whatever agreement he made with them he could carry out. Therefore, he would also have to be acceptable to the Judean society. This ruled out anyone who had aided Rome in the last war, and it meant that he would have to have the proper credentials in the local ideology. Only a rabbi from the aristocracy, one who had not taken part in the war could meet all these qualifications. Such a man was R. Simeon b. Yochai.

His family was of the aristocracy and had old ties to the Roman authorities. Having been in exile during the war, he could not be called either traitor or rebel. As we shall see, it was Simeon b. Yochai with whom the Romans dealt with in their negotiations in reestablishing a local government.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Finklestein, *op. cit.*, p. 159
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 162

V A POWERFUL AND WEALTHY FAMILY

Wealth and power came together in the family of Simeon b. Yochai. Although there is little direct evidence to show that R. Simeon himself was wealthy and powerful, all the circumstantial data support such a notion. Both his father and his son were significantly wealthy and powerful. One might assume therefore that R. Simeon was, too.

In the rabbinic literature we have no quotes from Father Yochai. This suggests that he was not of the scholar class. Nonetheless, from the few remarks about him it is apparent that Yochai was not only wealthy, but that he also enjoyed a friendly relationship with the Romans.

One report is found in Pes. 112a. Rabbi Simeon through someone's influence managed to enter the prison cell of his teacher Akiba. He said to Akiba, "Teach me Torah." But, R. Akiba replied to him, "I shall not teach you." R. Simeon then threatened his teacher saying, "אם צ"ן גתה מלמדנ' אבא ומסרן למלכות" Whatever the specific sense of אבא ומסרן למלכות might have been, it clearly represented some type of threat. It seems to say that Father Yochai via his connections with the Romans could have seen to it that R. Akiba was summarily punished. Even if this threat were but a jest between student and teacher, it explains

how R. Simeon could enter the prison at a time when Akiba was being held incommunicado. We may deduce from this report that Simeon's father had great influence.

At a later time of his life R. Simeon would again call upon his father's name in a similar manner. When the rabbis assembled and they were discussing whom to send to Rome for the annulment of the "harsh decrees," the lot fell upon R. Simeon. Facing a difficult and dangerous mission, he chided his colleagues whether they would have had the nerve to send him on such a perilous mission had his father still lived.

... and [the decrees] were re-instituted. [The Jews] then conferred as to who should go [to Rome] to work for the annulment of the decrees. Let R. Simeon b. Yochai go for he is experienced in miracles. And who should accompany him? — R. Eleazar son of R. Jose. Said R. Jose to them: And were my father Halafta still alive, would you have said to him give his son for slaughter? Answered R. Simeon: Were Yochai my father still alive, would you have said to him to give his son for slaughter? 1

Following this report is a statement that both R. Simeon and R. Eleazar went to Rome and received the annulment of the "harsh decrees." It is important to note that here, as before, the name of Father Yochai was brought into the conversation in an awesome and threatening tone. This is consistent with our assumption that he was a man of power and influence.

There is further evidence that the Yochai family was powerful in the reports concerning Eleazar, the son of Simeon. The picture we have of R. Eleazar ben Simeon is a strange one.

He is alternately called a "lion" and "vinegar, son of wine." He appears as a profligate son of a powerful forebear. His wealth is exceeded only by his appetites. Aside from his learning and wealth, he had an interesting relationship with the Roman authorities. Both he and R. Ishmael, son of Jose, aided the authorities in rounding up the remaining "brigands." These "brigands" mentioned in some of the following reports were perhaps remnants of the zealot bands.

In appearance both R. Eleazar and R. Ishmael had all the signs of wealth. They were exceptionally obese.

When R. Ishmael son of Jose and R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon met, one could pass through with a yoke of oxen under them and not touch them." Said a certain (Roman) matron to them, 'Your children are not yours!' They replied, 'Theirs (sc. our wives') is greater than ours.' '(But this proves my allegation) all the more!' (She observed). Some say they answered thus: 'For as a man is, so is his strength.' Others say, they answered her thus: 'Love suppresses the flesh.'...

R. Johanan said the waist of R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was a bottle of nine kabs capacity. ³

From an account of R. Eleazar doing penance we learn, in passing, the level of his wealth.

Every evening they spread out sixty sheets for him, and every morning sixty basins of blood and discharge were removed from under him. In the mornings his wife prepared him sixty kinds of pap, which he ate, and then recovered. Yet his wife did not permit him to go to the schoolhouse, lest the Rabbis discomfort him. Every evening he would exhort them /i.e., his sores7/, 'Come, my brethren and familiars!' whilst every morning he exclaimed, 'Depart, because ye disturb my studies!'

One day his wife, hearing him, cried out, 'You yourself bring them upon you, you have (already) squandered the money of my father's house!' So she left him and returned to her paternal home. Then

there came sixty seamen who presented him with sixty slaves, bearing sixty purses. They too prepared sixty kinds of pap for him, which he ate.

One day she (his wife) said to her daughter, 'Go and see how your father is faring now.'

She went, (and on her arrival) her father said to her, 'Go tell you mother that our (wealth) is greater than theirs' (sc. of his father-in-law's house).

The following account suggests that R. Eleazar was wealthy not only in the material sense, but also in honor. He once rivaled the great Judah HaNasi for position during the early part of their respective careers.

When Rabban Simeon b. Gamliel and R. Joshua b. Karḥah sat on benches, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon and Rabbi sat in front of them on the ground, raising objections and answering them. Said they, 'We drink their water (i.e., benefit from their learning), yet they sit upon the ground; let seats be placed for them!' Thus they were promoted. But R. Simeon b. Gamliel protested: 'I have a pigeon amongst you and ye wish to destroy it!' So Rabbi was put down. Thereupon R. Joshua b. Karḥah said: 'Shall he, who has a father, live, whilst he who has no father die!' So R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon too was put down, whereat he felt hurt saying, 'Ye have made him equal to me!' Now, until that day, whenever Rabbi made a statement, R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon supported him. But from then onward when Rabbi said, 'I have an objection', R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon retorted, 'If you have such and such an objection, this is your answer; now have you encompassed us with loads of answers in which there is no substance.' Rabbi, being thus humiliated, went and complained to his father. 'Let it not grieve you,' he answered, 'for he is a lion and the son of a lion, whereas you are a lion, the son of a fox. 5

Using the lines of a power hypothesis, one might interpret the reference to lions and foxes as referring to the social position of the parties. R. Eleazar was a person of extreme power. That power had been in his family for generations. Because of this, R. Judah had to put up with him. R. Judah's father said, in effect, "You in your own right may be powerful,

yet that power is not based on old family wealth. I am not a 'lion,' a man whose influence rests upon his brute force in the society. I am but a 'fox,' one whose influence depends upon his cunning and his ability to move others by fine words."

In addition to his wealth and learning R. Eleazar had close ties with the Romans. He and R. Ishmael, son of R. Jose, were important members of the state police. For their effort to wipe out the 'brigands' both of these men incurred the wrath of the other rabbis, as we learn in the following passage from Baba Mezi'a 83b-84b.

R. Eleazar, son of R. Simeon, once met an officer of the (Roman) Government who had been sent to arrest thieves. 'How can you detect them?' he said. 'Are they not compared to wild beasts, of whom it is written, Therein (in darkness) all the beasts of the forest creep forth?' (Others say, he referred him to the verse, He lieth in wait secretly as a lion in his den.)

'Maybe,' (he continued,) 'you take the innocent and allow the guilty to escape?'

The officer answered, 'What shall I do? It is the King's command.'

Said the Rabbi, 'Let me tell you what to do. Go into a tavern at the fourth hour of the day. If you see a man dozing with a cup of wine in his hand, ask him what he is. If he is a learned man, (you may assume that) he has risen early to pursue his studies; if he is a day labourer he must have been up early to do his work; if his work is of the kind done at night, he might have been rolling thin metal. If he is none of these, he is a thief; arrest him.' 6

Further in the text we learn that a report of this conversation reached the Roman authorities. The Romans then

asked R. Eleazar to take charge of investigations and arrests.⁷

This appointment stirred up the wrath of the other rabbis. R. Joshua ben Karḥah sent word to R. Eleazar saying, "Vinegar, son of wine! How long will you deliver up the people of God for slaughter!"⁸ While this might be an indication that R. Eleazar held the position for some time, it certainly indicates that he held the trust of the Roman authorities and was close to them.

There is some indication that R. Eleazar used his position to destroy a few of his personal enemies, when there was little reason to consider them 'thieves.'

One day a fuller met him, and dubbed him: 'Vinegar, son of wine.' Said the Rabbi to himself, 'Since he is so insolent, he is surely a culprit.' So he gave the order to his attendant: 'Arrest him! Arrest him!'

When his anger cooled, he went after him in order to secure his release, but did not succeed...they hanged him, and he (R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon) stood under the gallows and wept.⁹

It should be suggested that these 'thieves' and 'culprits' were the remnants of the troublesome zealot bands, diehards who remained fighting after the war was lost. This would explain the rabbis' antagonism toward R. Eleazar and R. Ishmael.

In any event the foregoing material indicates that the family of R. Simeon b. Yochai enjoyed both wealth and power and was closely tied to the Roman authorities. One might assume, therefore, that R. Simeon enjoyed similar privileges.

There is every reason to believe that of all the rabbis of his generation he alone had no need to engage in any mundane occupation.¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Me'ilah 17a-17b, Soncino trans.
- 2 ("Their waists were so large that as they stood waist to waist there was room for a yoke of oxen to pass beneath them.") n., B. Mezia 84a, Soncino trans.
- 3 B. Mezia 84a
- 4 Ibid., 84b
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 83b
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Graetz, op. cit., vol. II, p 441

VI EXILE IN A CAVE

The most famous story associated with R. Simeon tells how he and his son escaped from the Romans by hiding in a cave for thirteen years. The story is recounted in many places, the source of all of them, perhaps, the narrative in Shabbat 33.

R. Judah, R. Jose, and R. Simeon were sitting, and Judah, a son of proselytes, was sitting near them. R. Judah commenced (the discussion) by observing, 'How fine are the works of this people! They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths.'

R. Jose was silent. R. Simeon b. Yochai answered and said, 'All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to let harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges to levy tolls for them.'

Now, Judah the son of proselytes went and related their talk, which reached the government. They decreed: Judah who exalted (us), shall be exalted; Jose, who was silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris; Simeon, who censured, let him be executed. ¹

On hearing this decree, R. Simeon and his son went and hid in a cave. There various miracles occurred for them. A carob tree and a well were created for them. In order to preserve their garments, they undressed and studied all day sitting up to their necks in sand. ² Only for prayer would they don their clothes. At the end of many years they received a sign that they could leave the cave. Some say the sign was Elijah, others say a Bat Kol. Whatever the signal, after twelve years R. Simeon and his son left the cave.

So they emerged. Seeing a man ploughing and sowing, they exclaimed, 'They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal!'

Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, 'Have ye emerged to destroy My world: Return to your cave!'

So they returned and dwelt there twelve months, saying, 'The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is (limited to) twelve months.'

A Heavenly Echo then came forth and said, 'Go forth from your cave!'

Thus they issued; wherever R. Eleazar wounded, R. Simeon healed. Said he to him, 'My soul! You and I are sufficient for the world.' 5

This story has given rise to all manner of legend. Yet, assuming there is an element of truth behind the tale, one may deduce that the two rabbis were in exile for some time. Different periods of time have been suggested for the context of this story. The most probable is that it occurred during the Bar Kochba revolt.

As shown in the previous chapter, R. Simeon came from an extremely well-to-do family, one that also had strong ties to the Roman authorities. As a member of the establishment, he had nothing to gain and everything to lose by warring against Rome. If he had joined the rebels, he would have lost all his holdings. On the other hand he could not join the side of the Romans. That would have made him a traitor, and he would consequently have lost his position in his own society. The most reasonable solution to the dilemma would have been to flee.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Shabbat 33b, Soncino trans.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 B. R., Vayishlach Eccl. R. 10:8
- 5 Shabbat 33b

VII THE RETURN AND A TRIP TO ROME

The story of R. Simeon's ordination by Judah b. Baba can now be placed directly after the war when R. Simeon returned from his exile. As mentioned above, five young rabbis appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and encountered the last surviving tanna of the previous generation, Judah b. Baba. Although ordination was illegal, b. Baba prepared to ordain the five as "elders." Among the five were R. Simeon and R. Jose.

Looking at the story with a bit of scepticism, we are left with a simple statement. The five returnees were received by the Judeans as the legitimate heirs of the previous tanna. That is to say, as far as the Jews were concerned, R. Simeon, R. Jose, and the others were now the authorities of the tradition. They, and they alone, had the right to reestablish the government of the scholar class, and demand the allegiance of the populace.

Shortly thereafter the rabbis met to decide who was to go to Rome and bargain with the Roman government for terms of peace. The rabbis chose R. Simeon bar Yochai and Eleazar, son of Jose, to go to Rome.

On the way to Rome R. Simeon met a demon and with the aid of this creature he managed to get the emperor to give him a peace treaty.

Then Ben Temalion /the demon/ came to meet them. (He said): Is it your wish that I accompany you? Thereupon R. Simeon wept and said: The handmaid of my ancestor's house was found worthy of meeting an angel thrice, and I not even to meet him once. However, let the miracle be performed, no matter how. Thereupon he advanced and entered into the Emperor's daughter.

When (R. Simeon) arrived there, he called out: 'Ben Temalion leave her, Ben Temalion leave her,' and as he proclaimed this he left her.

He /the Emperor/ said to them: Request whatever you desire. They were led into the treasure house to take whatever they chose. They found that bill, took it and tore it to pieces. ¹

Disregarding the fantasy content in this story, one can deduce that it was Rabbi Simeon who was the go-between for Rome and Judea.

Admittedly, there is no way to ascertain with any certainty the time in which this story took place. Some believe that the trip to Rome occurred later in the time of Marcus Aurelius.² Since there is little evidence within the text to point to any specific time, positive dating is impossible. It is suggested here that the most likely context for this story is soon after the Bar Kochba revolt. Such a diplomatic conference would have to have taken place then before any Judean government could be established. A good delegate for such a mission would have been R. Simeon for reasons which have been mentioned previously.

Whatever the true context of this story, the fact that it was R. Simeon who was the go-between lends support to the contention that he was a more significant person in his

day than often recognized.

The Romans were concerned that the local leaders of Judea should maintain order and stop the various acts of insurgence. When Rome allowed R. Simeon b. Yochai to return to Judea, it was with the understanding that he and his colleagues stifle the rebellious and schismatic elements in the land.

In the next chapter are a number of reports which indicate the lengths to which the reestablished government went, in order to bring stability to the society.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Me'ilah 17b, Soncino trans.
- 2 Graetz, op. cit., vol. II, p. 449

VIII CLEANSING TIBERIAS

After the reestablishment of the Judean government there was a need to demonstrate its authority publicly. There were many groups in Judea who would not readily accept the authority of the new government. Some, due to their ideology, could never accept the authority of the rabbis. The Christians and the Samaritans saw themselves as independent from the Jewish leaders. So too, after such a bitter war there were diehards who considered the new government an agent of the enemy Rome. In addition, every society has its small fringe groups which are always against the establishment. Judea was no exception.

Yet, the new government was under severe pressure from Rome to stabilize the social order. How then did the new government deal with the intransigent elements? The following story suggests that the rabbis used both force and the threat of force to bring peace to the society. Because the story is found in a number of sources, it might be useful to present two of the more exemplary ones. The first is from Shabbat 33b, and the other from Ecclesiastes Rabbah X:8.

There is a place of doubtful uncleanness, he was informed, and the priests have trouble going round it. Said he [R. Simeon]: Does any man know that there was a presumption of cleanness here?

A certain old man replied, Here (R. Johanan) b. Zakkai cut down lupines of terumah. So he /R. Simeon/ did likewise. Wherever it (the ground) was hard he declared it clean, while wherever it was loose he marked it out.

Said a certain old man. The son of Yohai has purified a cemetery!

Said he /R. Simeon/, Had you not been with us, or even if you had been with us but did not vote, you might have said well. But now that you were with us and voted with us, it will be said, (Even) whores paint one another; how much more so scholars!

He cast his eye upon him, and he died. Then he went out into the street and saw Judah, the son proselytes.

'That man is still in the world!' he exclaimed.

He cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones. ¹

There are many elements to this story. First there is the nature of the problem. Tiberias had been built upon a grave yard. This made it impossible for anyone who was a priest to enter the city. The law was, and still is, that priests are forbidden to have any contact, whatsoever, with the dead or cemeteries. As the capital of the Galilee, it was a center of government, and trade. Later, in the time of Johanan b. Nappaha (d. 279 C.E.) it would be the seat of the greatest Judean academy.²

It was both beneficial to the Romans and a signal of the new Sanhedrin's authority when Tiberias was declared clean. More people could now live and trade in the city. From the time of Herod this had been a goal of the government.³ Yet, one could ask how such a declaration of purity established the authority of the new Sanhedrin? In the expanded version of this same story it is clear.

He /R. Simeon/ then said, 'We ought to cleanse Tiberias (of the dead buried there).'

What did he do? He took lupine and scattered them in the street, and whoever had died (and been buried there) rose to the surface.

A Cuthean saw him doing this and said, 'Shall I not make sport of this elder of the Jew?'

What did he do? He took a corpse and hid it in the street which R. Simeon had cleansed. (some say /that he hid it in the street called/ 'Geribah,' and others in the street of Bar Kardina.)

'Yes,' he replied.

He said to him, 'Supposing I produce for you one corpse from there!'

He answered, 'Bring it out and show me.'

R. Simeon b. Yochai at once perceived by the Holy Spirit that the man had himself hidden it there; so he declared, 'I decree that he who is lying down shall stand up and he who is standing up shall lie down.'

Another version is: 'I decree that he who is above shall descend and he who is below shall ascend;' and so it happened to him.'

When R. Simeon departed he passed the Synagogue of Magdala and heard the voice of Nakai the scribe saying, 'Ben Yochai cleansed Tiberias!'

R. Simeon said, 'May such-and-such come upon me if there are not in my possession traditions (from my teachers) as numerous as the hairs of my head that Tiberias will in the future be cleansed, and will become (a place of residence) for those who eat "terumah" save only in this spot and this;' but he did not believe him.

R. Simeon said to Nakai, 'You have broken down the fence of the disciples of the Sages,' and he applied to him WHOSO BREAKETH THROUGH A FENCE, A SERPENT SHALL BITE HIM; and so it happened to him.

R. Simeon b. Yochai passed through (Beth Netufta) in the Sabatical year, and saw a man gathering aftergrowths of the seventh year.

He said to him, 'Is it not the seventh year!'

The man retorted, 'But was it not you who permitted it! For have we not learnt: (R. Simeon says:) All aftergrowths are permitted with the exception of the aftergrowths of cabbage, because the like of these come not under the heading of wild vegetables?'

He replied to him, 'But do not my colleagues differ from me (and declare all aftergrowths forbidden)!'

He applied to him WHOSO BREAKETH THROUGH A FENCE, A SERPENT SHALL BITE HIM; and so it happened to him.

This story, or series of stories, suggests that there was recently before the trip to Tiberias a meeting of the Sanhedrin. Otherwise, the references to a meeting and a vote make no sense.

It is possible that this meeting was the first one of the newly revised Sanhedrin. Graetz refers to it when he wrote:

The unexpected end of the persecution recalled the fugitives to their native land. The seven disciples of Akiba - the only heirs to the spiritual heritage of former times - who, for the most part, had emigrated to Babylon, now returned. These were Meir, Judah ben Ilai, Jose ben Chalafta, Jochanan of Alexandria, Simeon ben Jochai, Eleazar ben (or ben Shamma) and Nehemiah. They repaired directly to the plain of Rimmon, made notable during the revolution, to consider the introduction of a leap year, the calendar probably having become incorrect. At the first meeting a fierce contest ensued, probably with reference to one of the Halachas of Akiba, but the dispute terminated in a friendly settlement.

If this was the meeting referred to in R. Simeon's trip to Tiberias, it would make for a consistent reconstruction. Having received the permission of Rome to restore local government, the leaders of Judea; Meir, Judah, Jose and Simeon, called a meeting to establish the authority of the new body. We can understand the conflict that must have occurred as

various personalities and groups struggled for position in the new Sanhedrin. The reference to the calendar is interesting. One of the most significant signals a new government can make in proclaiming its authority is to revise the calendar. He who controls the calendar controls the society.

The struggle must have been fierce. And, it matters little what the exact argument over halacha was. What was important was that everyone, without exception, accept the authority of the new body. The first duty of this new Sanhedrin was to establish stability. Stability could be had only if everyone recognized its authority. Any threat to that authority would have to be severely dealt with.

The incident at Tiberias was a trial balloon. The report that the city was cleaned by a miracle of rising bodies must have been questioned. The issue, however, was not the throwing of lupines on the ground. The issue was authority. The rabbis had voted areas of Tiberias from then on clean. Some areas were set aside and declared unclean; others were considered pure. To challenge this was to challenge the authority of the Sanhedrin.

The purification of Tiberias was then both a test and a signal of rabbinic authority. Yet, some elements would not accept the authority of the rabbis. They wished to maintain

their own traditions. This we see in the use of the phrase "Whoso breaketh through a fence." The fence is the חומה סבב, the fence around the law, a fence created solely on rabbinic authority. The Samaritan, the scribe, and the harvester, all rejected the law of the Sanhedrin. They challenged its authority. Nakai, the Scribe, scoffed at the traditions of the Synod. Yet, he had been with the rabbis when the vote was taken. Majority rule was binding upon him. How could the Sanhedrin survive, if all its members did not abide by the Majority Rule? Therefore, he was found guilty of breaking the law, and summarily he died or, more likely, was killed.

In these stories, another figure emerges who, like Nakai, was determined to challenge R. Simeon's authority to cleanse the city. In one passage he is described as a peasant, in the other as a Cuthean (i.e., a Samaritan). He attempted a public display to prove the senselessness of R. Simeon's declaration. He planted or found, a body in an area which R. Simeon had determined was clean. R. Simeon's response was a curious phrase, "'I decree that he who is lying down shall stand up and he who is standing up shall lie down.'" Another version is: 'I decree that he who is above shall descend and he who is below shall ascend.'

This phrase might have been more than merely a curse. Perhaps it referred to a total change in the structure of the country, that is to say, for some period of time various groups had had a certain position in the society and now the tables were turned. Those groups which during the rebellion worked with the Romans were now to be purged. While under the protection of Rome, they enjoyed a certain status. Now Rome withdrew that protection, favoring a new coalition of leadership.

This contention is supported by the events surrounding Judah ben Gerim, the son of proselytes. In the portion from Shabbat 33b, he appeared to have been rewarded by the Romans for informing on his colleagues, "and Judah, who exalted (us), shall be exalted."⁷ In the story of Tiberias it is written, "Then he [R. Simeon] went out into the street and saw Judah, the son of proselytes. 'That man is still in the world!' he exclaimed. He cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones."⁸ If Judah, as the former account has it, was truly exalted by Rome, how then could R. Simeon execute him. This could only happen if Rome had withdrawn its protection from the traitorous elements of Judea. And, this would explain R. Simeon's use of the phrase, "I decree that he who is above shall descend and he who is below shall ascend." It was a statement of the new order.

The story of the harvester, like the others, represents the need of the Sanhedrin to enforce its authority. When the harvester replied to R. Simeon's accusation that he was not really breaking the law, he quoted R. Simeon himself as his authority. One would think that R. Simeon would have shown kindness to someone who followed his opinions in law. But, no! Instead, R. Simeon condemned him as one "Who breaketh through the fence," as if to say, "It doesn't matter what I or any other individual rabbi says. What matters is the authority of the council. And no one is above the majority rule." Or, as he says in the passage from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, "But do not my colleagues differ from me (and declare all aftergrowths forbidden)!" Like the others, the harvester was executed because he rejected the authority of the Sanhedrin.

The incident at Tiberias, then, was one of establishing the authority of the new Sanhedrin. R. Simeon came as one of the most prestigious members of the new Synod and decreed that such-and-such areas in Tiberias were clean. But, some elements refused to accept his authority. They were summarily executed. Lest anyone think that the authority challenged was only that of R. Simeon, the story of the harvester was included to demonstrate that the operable authority in question was not that of R. Simeon per se, but rather that of the entire Synod.

Further, the story suggests that a major change took place when the Synod established its authority as unquestionable. Some social elements which had heretofore enjoyed a high social position in the country were humble. The leaders of the new Synod then consolidated their authority as the leaders of the country.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Shabbat 33b.-33a., Soncino translation
- 2 Jewish Encyclopedia "Tiberias"
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Eccl. R., Soncino translation
- 5 Graetz, op. cit., p. 433
- 6 Shabbat 33b, Soncino translation
- 8 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The following method has been used throughout this project. A working hypothesis was made that in every story or legend there was an element of truth. After we determined what the element of truth, or fact, was, the facts were arranged in such a manner that they lent themselves to interpretation. Probable reconstruction was then suggested.

Early in the project a number of hypotheses were made to explain the data. Yet, time and again these hypotheses had to be discarded. Either they failed to explain the majority of data, or later discoveries did not support them.

In the end, the hypothesis that R. Simeon b. Yochai was, indeed, a powerful member of the aristocracy proved the best key for reconstructing his life. First, this hypothesis explained the accumulated data in a succinct way. Second, as more data were discovered, this hypothesis was continually supported.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the psyche of an individual no longer living. To explain an historical figure's actions by his supposed psychological motive is fraught with danger.

Therefore, in this reconstruction the subject's social position was established first. Then his actions were explained on the basis of his "positional motive."

This method proved itself time and again. On the basis of the reconstruction, the nature of yet undiscovered data was often predicted.

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