

The Survivors Rebuild: Rabbi Meir and the Post Bar Kokhba Generation

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)

Decrees Against Judaism

R. Nathan says: "for My lovers and the keepers of My mitzvot": the Jews who dwell in Eretz Yisrael, and give their lives for the mitzvot. Why are you going out to be executed? Because I circumcised my son, the Jew. Why are you going out to be burned? Because I read in the Torah. Why are you going out to be crucified? Because I ate matzoh. Why are you being given a hundred lashes? Because I took the lulav. (Mechilta deRabbi Yishmael Yitro 6)

why did they call Elisha Man of Wings? Because on one occasion the evil kingdom of Rome issued a decree against Israel that, as punishment, they would pierce the brain of anyone who dons phylacteries. Nevertheless, Elisha would don them and defiantly go out to the marketplace. One day, an official [kasdor] who was appointed to enforce the decree saw him; Elisha ran away from him, and the official ran after him. When the official reached him, Elisha removed the phylacteries from his head and held them in his hand. The officer asked him: What is that in your hand? Elisha said to him: It is merely a dove's wings. A miracle was performed: He opened his hand, and, indeed, it was found to be a dove's wings. Therefore, in commemoration of this miracle, they would call him Elisha, Man of Wings. (Shabbat 49)

One time the wicked kingdom of Rome issued decrees of religious persecution against the Jewish people. They said that anyone who ordains judges will be killed, and anyone who is ordained will be killed, and the city in which they ordain the judges will be destroyed, and the signs identifying the boundaries of the city in which they ordain judges will be uprooted.

Who Will Lead the Next Generation?

What did Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava do? He went and sat between two large mountains, between two large cities, and between two Shabbat boundaries: Between Usha and Shefaram,, and there he ordained five elders. And they

were: Rabbi Meir, and Rabbi Yehuda, and Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Yosei, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua. Rav Avya adds that Rabbi Nehemya was also among those ordained. When their enemies discovered them, Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava said to the newly ordained Sages: **My sons, run for your lives. They said to him: My teacher, what will be with you?** Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava was elderly and unable to run. He said to them: In any case, **I am cast before them like a stone that cannot be overturned;** The Roman soldiers did not move from there until they had inserted three hundred iron spears [lunkhiyot] into him, making him appear like a sieve pierced with many holes. And with regard to Rabbi Meir, did Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava actually ordain him? But doesn't Rabba bar bar Hana say that Rabbi Yohanan says: **Anyone who says that Rabbi Akiva did not ordain Rabbi Meir is nothing other than mistaken.** The Gemara answers: **Rabbi Akiva** in fact **ordained** Rabbi Meir, but the people **did not accept** the appointment, as Rabbi Meir was still very young. Therefore, some time later, **Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava ordained him** a second time, **and they accepted it.** (Sanhedrin 14)

The Sanhedrin Reestablishes Itself in Usha

שה"ש רבה ב, ה בשלפי השמד נתפנסו רבותינו לאושא, ואלו הן: רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה, רבי מאיר ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון בן יוחאי ורבי אליעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי ורבי אליעזר בן יעקב, שלחו אצל זקני הגליל ואמרו כל מי שהוא למד יבוא וילמד, וכל מי שאינו למד יבוא וילמד. נתפנסו ולמדו ועשו כל צרכיהון כיון שהגיע זמנם להפטר, אמרו מקום שנתקבלנו בתוכו אנו מניחים אותו ויקום. . . ואתם אחינו בני אושא שקבלתם רבותינו בסבר פנים יפות על אחת כמה וכמה

Ketubot 49-50 Rabbi Ile'a said that Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda bar Hanina: In Usha the Sages instituted that a man should sustain his sons and daughters when they are minors.

Rabbi Ile'a said that Reish Lakish said: In Usha the Sages instituted that in a case of **one who writes** a document stating that he is giving **all his property** as a gift to his sons in his lifetime, **he and his wife are sustained from the property** until their deaths.

Rabbi Ile'a said: In Usha the Sages instituted that **one who dispenses** his money to charity **should not dispense more than one-fifth.**

Rav Yitzhak said: In Usha the Sages enacted that a person should treat his son gently, even if he does not want to study, until his son is **twelve years** old. From this point forward he harasses him in all aspects of his life in order to force him to study.

The Survivors: Rabbi Meir and Bruria: No Jew Left Behind

Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students in an area of land that stretched **from Gevat to Antipatris** in Judea, and they all died in one period of time, **because they did not treat each other with respect. And the world was desolate of Torah until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the South and taught his Torah to them.** This second group of disciples consisted of **Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. And these are the very ones who upheld the study of Torah at that time.** (Yevamot 62)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Anywhere that you find a statement introduced with: A certain disciple said before Rabbi Akiva in the name of Rabbi Yishmael, it is none other than Rabbi Meir, who was the student who served both Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva.. . . Rabbi Aḥa bar Ḥanina said: It is revealed and known before the One Who spoke and the world came into being that in the generation of Rabbi Meir there was no one of the Sages who is his equal.(Eruvin 13)

Bruria and Rabbi Meir: Complicated Backgrounds

The Roman authorities then **sent Nero Caesar against the Jews. When he came** to Jerusalem, he wished to test his fate. **He shot an arrow to the east** and the arrow **came** and **fell in Jerusalem.** He then shot another arrow **to the west** and it also **fell in Jerusalem.** He shot an arrow **in all four directions of the heavens,** and each time the arrow **fell in Jerusalem.** Nero then conducted another test: **He said to a child: Tell me a verse** that you learned today. **He said to him** as follows: **“And I will lay My vengeance upon Edom by the hand of My people Israel”** (Ezekiel 25:14). Nero **said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, wishes to destroy His Temple, and He wishes to wipe his hands with that man, i.e., with me.** The Romans are associated with Edom, the descendants of Esau. If I continue on this mission, I will eventually be punished for having served as God’s agent to bring about the destruction. So **he fled and became a convert, and ultimately Rabbi Meir descended from him.** (Gittin 56)

The Romans **brought Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon** for judgment, and they **said to him: Why did you occupy yourself with the Torah?** Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon **said to them,** citing a verse: **“As the Lord my God commanded me”** (Deuteronomy 4:5). **They immediately sentenced him to death by means of burning, and they sentenced his wife to execution by decapitation, and his daughter was condemned to sit in a brothel [kubba shel zonot].**

His students said to him: Our teacher, what do you see? Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon **said to them: I see the parchment burning, but its letters are flying to the heavens.**

Berurya, the wife of Rabbi Meir, was a daughter of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon. She said to Rabbi Meir: It is a disrespectful matter for me that my

sister is sitting in a brothel; you must do something to save her. (Avoda Zara 17-18)

Teaching Torah in the Synagogue in Hamat

Rabbi Meir would teach Torah on Friday nights in the synagogue in Hamat, a small town near Tiberius, and there was a woman who used to listen to his lectures. One night, Rabbi Meir spoke for longer than usual, and the woman stayed until he finished. By the time she got home, the candles had already burned down. "Where were you?!" demanded her husband.

"I was listening to a Torah lecture," she answered.

Her husband said to her, "I swear that you will not enter my house until you go spit in the face of the rabbi who was lecturing."

Not knowing what to do, she stayed outside, until her neighbors said to her, "Come, let's go together to the rabbi."

When Rabbi Meir saw them coming, G-d gave him insight into the problem. He immediately pretended that his eye hurt him.

"I need someone to spit in my eye, to cure it! Can one among you do it?" he asked.

Her friends nudged her forward.

"Spit in my eye seven times and I'll be cured," Rabbi Meir told her.

When she did, he told her, "Go home and tell your husband, 'You said I should spit once, but I spit seven times!'"

His students were appalled, and asked, "Rebbe, how could you let people disgrace you like that? When they disgrace a Torah scholar, they disgrace the Torah! If you'd told us to, we'd have forced her husband to let her come home!"

Rabbi Meir answered, "The honor of Meir is not greater than the honor of G-d! If the Torah tells us to erase the name of G-d for the sake of peace between a husband and wife in the case of a *sotah* (wayward wife),¹ surely Meir can be dishonored for the same reason!" (Yerushalmi Sotah 1:4)

Hot Springs of Hamat

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said in the name of bar Kappara: Initially, people would bathe even on Shabbat in hot water that was heated before Shabbat. The bathhouse attendants began to heat water on Shabbat and say that it was heated before Shabbat. Therefore, the

Sages **prohibited** bathing in **hot water** and **permitted sweating**. **And they would still bathe in hot water and say: We are sweating**, and that is why we entered the bathhouse. Therefore, the Sages **prohibited sweating and permitted** bathing in **the hot springs of Tiberias**. **And people would still bathe in hot water heated by fire and say: We bathed in the hot springs of Tiberias**. Therefore, **they prohibited even the hot springs of Tiberias and permitted them** to bathe in **cold water**. When the Sages **saw that their decrees were not upheld** by the people because of their stringency, **they permitted them** to bathe in **the hot springs of Tiberias**, and the decree prohibiting sweating remained in place. (Shabbat 40)

Bruriah: A Rare Learned Woman

There was a story about Rabbi Meir who was sitting and expounding in the study hall on Shabbat afternoon, when two of his sons died. What did his mother do? She placed both of them on the bed and spread a sheet over them. At the end of Shabbat, Rabbi Meir came home from the study hall. He said to her, 'Where are my two sons?' She said [back], 'They went to the study hall.' He said to her, 'I scanned the study hall and I did not see them.' They gave him the cup of Havdalah and he separated [the days of the week with the closure of Shabbat]. He repeated and said, 'Where are my two sons?' She said, 'They went elsewhere and they are coming now.' She placed food in front of him and he ate and blessed. After he blessed, she said to him, 'I have a question to ask you.' He said to her, 'Say your question.' She said to him, 'Rabbi, before today, a man came and deposited something with me, and now he is coming to take it. Should we return it to him or not?' He said, 'My daughter, one who has a deposit with him must return it to its owner.' She said to him, 'Were it not for your consent, I would not have given it to him.' What did she do? She grabbed his hand, brought him up to that room, had him approach the bed and took off the sheet from upon them. When he saw both of them dead and laying upon the bed, he began to cry and say, 'My sons, my sons, my teachers, my teachers - my sons in the way of the world, my teachers in that they would enlighten my eyes with their Torah.' At that time, she said to Rabbi Meir, 'Rabbi, is this not what I told you - do I not need to return the deposit to its Owner?' He said, "'The Lord has given and the Lord has taken; may the name of the Lord be blessed'" (Job 1:21)." (Midrash Mishlei 31)

Pray for Repentance

There were these hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of anguish. Rabbi Meir prayed for God to have mercy on them, that they should die. Rabbi Meir's wife, Berurya, said to him: What is your thinking? On what basis do you pray for the death of these hooligans? Do you base yourself on the verse, **as it is written: "Let sins cease from the land"**

(Psalms 104:35), which you interpret to mean that the world would be better if the wicked were destroyed? But **is it written**, let **sinner**s cease?" Let **sins** cease, **is written**. One should pray for an end to their transgressions, not for the demise of the transgressors themselves. **Moreover, go to the end of the verse**, where it says: "**And the wicked will be no more.**" If, as you suggest, **transgressions shall cease** refers to the demise of the evildoers, how is it possible that **the wicked will be no more**, i.e., that they will no longer be evil? **Rather, pray for God to have mercy on them, that they should repent**, as if they repent, then the wicked will be no more, as they will have repented.

Rabbi Meir saw that Berurya was correct **and he prayed for God to have mercy on them, and they repented. (Brachot 10)**

"You are the sons to the Lord your God," indicates that **when you act like sons** and cleave to the Holy One, Blessed be He, **you are called sons**, but when **you do not act like sons you are not called sons**. This is **the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. And Rabbi Meir says: Either way you are still called sons (Kiddushin 36)**

The Survivors: Elisha Ben Abuyah: Seduced by Rome?

Rabba bar Sheila found Elijah the prophet, who had appeared to him. He said to Elijah: **What is the Holy One, Blessed be He, doing?** Elijah said to him: **He is stating halakhot transmitted by all of the Sages, but in the name of Rabbi Meir He will not speak. He said to him: Why?** He replied: **Because he learned halakhot from the mouth of Aher.** He said to him: **Why** should he be judged unfavorably for that? **Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate and ate its contents while throwing away its peel. He said to him:** Indeed, your defense has been heard above. **Now God is saying: My son, Meir, says: When a person suffers**, e.g., by receiving lashes or the death penalty at the hands of the court, **how does the Divine Presence express itself? Woe is Me from My head, woe is Me from My arm**, as God empathizes with the sufferer. **If the Holy One, Blessed be He, suffers to such an extent over the blood of the wicked, how much more so does He suffer over the blood of the righteous that is spilled.**

Rabbi Meir was sitting and expounding and expounding the law in Tiberias and Elisha, his rabbi, passed by on the street riding a horse on Shabbat. And they said to Rabbi Meir: "Look! Elisha is passing by in the street!" Rabbi Meir greeted him and Elisha said: "what are you up to expounding?" Rabbi Meir said "and Hashem blessed the end of Job's life more than the beginning (Job 42:12)". And Elisha responded: "What are you saying about it?" And he replied: ""blessed" that is he doubled his wealth for him". And Elisha said to him "Akiva your teacher did not used to say that, but rather "And Hashem blessed the end of Job's life more than the beginning": because of his mindful repentance and good deeds which were in his hand at the beginning. What else?" And Rabbi Meir responded: "the

end of a matter is better than its beginning (Ecclesiastes 7:8)". And Elisha said "What did you say about that"? And Rabbi Meir replied "you have the example of a man who buys merchandise in his youth and he has a loss, and he profits from it in old age. Another interpretation: "the end of a matter is better than its beginning" you have the example of a man who does evil deeds in his youth but good deeds in his old age. Another interpretation: "the end of a matter is better than its beginning": a man can learn Torah in his youth and forget it, but in his old age he can renew it, and so "the end of a matter is better than its beginning". And Elisha said to him: "Akiva your teacher did not say this, but rather "the end of a matter is good" that is when it is good "from its beginning". And for me there is this example: Avuyah, my father, was a great man of his generation and when the time came for my circumcision he invited all the great men of Jerusalem, and he invited Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua among them. And when they ate and drank some sang songs and others alphabetic acrostics. Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Joshua, these men are busying themselves on pointless things, and we are neglecting to pursue our affairs. So they began with the Torah and from the Torah the Prophets and from the Prophets to the writings and they rejoiced in these words as when they were given from Sinai surrounded by flaming fire. And were they not given from Sinai in fire, as it is said "And the mountain burned with a fire reaching up to the heart of the sky (Deuteronomy 4:11)"? And Avuya said "So great is the power of the Torah, this son of mine, if he survives, I will offer to give him to the Torah." And so because the intention of my thought was not for the sake of Heaven, my Torah did not continue in me. And what further did you discuss, Meir?" Rabbi Meir responded to him: "Gold or glass cannot match its value, Nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged for it (Job 28:17)". And he said: "What did you say about that?" And Rabbi Meir said: "These are words of the Torah which are difficult to buy as vessels of gold and easy to destroy like glass". Elisha responded: "Akiva your teacher did not speak this way, but rather as vessels of gold and glass if they are broken, it is possible to repair them, so a wise disciple that has lost his Mishnah is able to renew it". And then Elisha said: "return". And Rabbi Meir said: "Why?". And he responded: "because this is the edge of the Shabbat boundary". He responded: "How do you know?" Elisha said: "From the footsteps of my horse which has gone across 2,000 *amot*. And Meir said: "And with all this wisdom of yours you will not return?" And Elisha responded: "That is not in my power". And he asked: "Why?". And Elisha explained to him "I was riding on a horse and while passing behind a synagogue on Yom Kippur that fell on Shabbat I heard a voice from Heaven break forth saying: "Turn back, O rebellious children (Jeremiah 3:22). Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you (Malachi 3:7), except for Elisha the son of Avuya because he knows my strength and has rebelled against me". How did this thing happen to him? They said that one time he was sitting and reciting in the Valley of Geinosar and he saw that one man went to the top of a palm tree and took the mother bird with her young and descended without trouble, and on the day after Shabbat he

saw another man go to the top of the palm tree and he took the young and sent away the mother and when he came down a snake bit him and he died. He said: "As it is written: "Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life (Deuteronomy 22:7), but how is it good for this man and how is there a long life for this man?" And he did not know that it had been interpreted by Rabbi Akiva in public: "that you may fare well (*tov*)" in the world that is entirely good and "have a long life (*ha'arakhta*)" that is in the length (*'arokh*) of eternity". And some were saying because he saw the tongue of Rabbi Judah the baker given to the mouth of a dog. And Elisha said: "If the tongue which occupied itself every day in Torah [is treated] thus, how much more the tongue of the one who knows nothing and is not occupied in Torah!" and thus he said "If so then there is no reward for the righteous and no resurrection of the dead!" And some were saying it is because his mother while pregnant was passing by the idolatrous temples and she smelled [the sacrifices] and they gave to her from the sacrificial meat and she ate it and it was poison spreading in her belly like the venom of a large snake. After many days Elisha the son of Avuya became sick and they said to Rabbi Meir: "Elisha your teacher is sick." He went to greet him and said "Repent again". And Elisha responded: "After this they would accept me?" And Rabbi Meir said: "You return man to dust (Psalm 90:3); until the crushing of the soul". As soon as he heard this Elisha son of Avuya wept and died. And Rabbi Meir was rejoicing and said: "my teacher was taken as he repented!". And when they buried Elisha, a light descended to burn his grave and they said to Rabbi Meir: "the grave of your teacher is burning". And he went and spread his tallit over it. And he said to Elisha: **"Stay this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well (*tov*); let him do the kinsman's part but if he be not willing to do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as Hashem lives; lie down until the morning."** (Ruth 3:13)". **"Stay this night"** in this world that is all night. **"It shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well"**: **"It shall be in the morning"** that is in the world that is all good"; **"that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman"** that is the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said "Good is Hashem to all (Psalm 145:9)". **"If he be not willing to do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as Hashem lives; lie down until the morning."** and the fire stopped. (Ruth Rabba 6)

The Survivors: Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai: The Zealot

when Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehuda, son of converts, sat beside them. Rabbi Yehuda opened and said: How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans, as they established marketplaces, established bridges, and established bathhouses. Rabbi Yosei was silent. Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai responded and said: Everything that they established, they established only for their

own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to pamper themselves; and bridges, to collect taxes from all who pass over them. Yehuda, son of converts, went and related their statements to his household, and those statements continued to spread until they were heard by the monarchy. They ruled and said: Yehuda, who elevated the Roman regime, shall be elevated and appointed as head of the Sages, the head of the speakers in every place. Yosei, who remained silent, shall be exiled from his home in Judea as punishment, and sent to the city of Tzippori in the Galilee. And Shimon, who denounced the government, shall be killed. . .

They went and they hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day in that manner. At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said: Who will inform bar Yoḥai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated?

They emerged from the cave, and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai said: These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months. Surely their sin was atoned in that time. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world, as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah. As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man who was holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: Why do you have these? He said to them: In honor of Shabbat. They said to him: And let one suffice. He answered them: One is corresponding to: “Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8), and one is corresponding to: “Observe the Shabbat day, to keep it holy” (Deuteronomy 5:12). Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the mitzvot are to Israel. Their minds were put at ease and they were no longer as upset that people were not engaged in Torah study. (Shabbat 33)

Work or Torah?

The Sages taught: What is the meaning of that which the verse states: “And you shall gather your grain”? Because it is stated: “This Torah shall not depart from your mouths, and you shall contemplate in it day and night” (Joshua 1:8), I might have thought that these matters are to be understood as they are written; one is to literally spend his days immersed exclusively in Torah study. Therefore, the verse states: “And you shall gather your grain, your wine and your oil,” assume in their regard, the way of the world; set aside time not only for Torah, but also for work. This is the statement of Rabbi Yishmael.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: Is it possible that a person plows in the plowing season and sows in the sowing season and harvests in the harvest season and threshes in the threshing season and winnows in the windy season, what will become of Torah? Rather, when Israel performs God’s will, their work is performed by others, as it is stated: “And strangers will stand and feed your flocks, and foreigners will be your plowmen and your vinedressers” (Isaiah 61:5). When Israel does not perform God’s will, their work is performed by them themselves, as it is stated: “And you shall gather your grain.” Moreover, if Israel fails to perform God’s will, others’ work will be performed by them, as it is stated: “You shall serve your enemy whom God shall send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness and in want of all things” (Deuteronomy 28:48).

Abaye said:, many have acted in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael, and were successful Many have acted in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai and were not successful (Berachot 35)