

The Bar Kochba Revolt

LAMENTATIONS RABBA 2:4

Lamentations Rabba was written in Palestine. It was finally redacted some time in the fifth century. It is one of the only rabbinic sources which describes the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135 CE) at all.

Lamentations Rabba 2:4:

R. Yochanan said: Rabbi used to expound, "There shall step forth a star (kochav) out of Jacob" (Num. XXIV, 17), thus: read not 'kochav' but 'kozav' (lie). When R. Akiva beheld Bar Koziva he exclaimed, 'This is the king Messiah!' R. Yochanan b. Torta retorted: 'Akiva, grass will grow in your cheeks and he will still not have come!'

R. Yochanan said: The voice is the voice of Jacob (Gen. XXVII, 22) - the voice [of distress caused by] the Emperor Hadrian, who slew eighty thousand myriads of human beings at Beitar (the final battle site of Bar Kochba and his troops). Eighty thousand vanguard troops besieged Beitar where Bar Koziva was located who had with him two hundred thousand men with an amputated finger.

The Sages sent him the message, 'How long will you continue to make the men of Israel blemished?'

He asked them, 'How else shall they be tested?'

They answered, 'Let anyone who cannot uproot a cedar from Lebanon be refused enrollment in your army.'

He thereupon had two hundred thousand men of each rank; and when they went forth to battle they cried, '[O God,] neither help us nor discourage us!'

That is what is written, Have you not, O God, cast us off? And go not forth, O God, with our hosts (Ps. LX, 12).

And what did Bar Koziva use to do?

He would catch the missiles from the enemy's catapults on one of his knees and hurl them back, killing many of the foe.

On that account R. Akiva made his remark.

For three and a half years the Emperor Hadrian surrounded Beitar. In the city was R. Eleazar of Modim who continually wore sackcloth and fasted, and he used to pray daily, 'Lord of the Universe, sit not in judgment to-day!' so that [Hadrian] thought of returning home.

A Cuthean (a Samaritan, a sect against the Jews) went and found him and said, 'My lord, so long as that old rooster wallows in ashes you will not conquer the city. But wait for me, because I will do something which will enable you to subdue it to-day.'

He immediately entered the gate of the city, where he found R. Eleazar standing and praying. He pretended to whisper in the ear of R. Eleazar of Modim. People went and informed Bar Koziva, 'Your friend, R. Eleazar, wishes to surrender the city to Hadrian.'

He sent and had the Cuthean brought to him and asked, 'What did you say to him?'

He replied, 'If I tell you, the king will kill me; and if I do not tell you, you will kill me. It is better that I should kill myself and the secrets of the government be not divulged'.

Bar Koziva was convinced that R. Eleazar wanted to surrender the city, so when the latter finished his praying he had him brought into his presence and asked him, 'What did the Cuthean tell you?'

He answered, 'I do not know what he whispered in my ear, nor did I hear anything, because I was standing in prayer and am unaware what he said.'

Bar Koziva flew into a rage, kicked him with his foot and killed him.

A Bat Kol (a divine voice from heaven) issued forth and proclaimed, 'Woe to the worthless shepherd that leaves the flock! The sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye.' (Zech. 11:17)

It intimated to him, 'You have paralyzed the arm of Israel and blinded their right eye; therefore your arm will wither and your right eye will grow dim!'

At once the sins [of the people] caused Beitar to be captured. Bar Koziva was slain and his head taken to Hadrian.

'Who killed him?' asked Hadrian.

A Cuthean said to him, 'I killed him.'

'Bring his body to me,' he ordered.

He went and found a snake encircling its neck;

so [Hadrian when told of this] exclaimed, 'If his God had not slain him who could have overcome him?'

And there was applied to him the verse, Except their Rock had given them over (Deut. XXXII, 30).

They slew the inhabitants until the horses waded in blood up to their nostrils, and the blood rolled along stones of the size of forty se'ah (71 gallons, the same amount as is needed to make a mikvah kosher....) and flowed into the sea [staining it for] a distance of four miles.

Should you say that [Beitar] is close to the sea; was it not in fact four miles distant from it?

Now Hadrian possessed a large vineyard eighteen miles square, as far as from Tiberias to Sepphoris, and they surrounded it with a fence consisting of the slain at Beitar. Nor was it decreed that they should be buried until a certain king arose and ordered their interment.

R. Huna said: On the day when the slain of Beitar were allowed burial, the benediction 'Who are kind and deals kindly' was instituted.

'Who are kind' because the bodies did not putrefy, 'and deals kindly' because they were allowed burial.

R. Yochanan said: The brains of three hundred children [were dashed] upon one stone, and three hundred baskets of capsules of tefillin were found in Beitar, each basket being of the capacity of three se'ah, so that there was a total of three hundred se'ah.

R. Gamliel said: There were five hundred schools in Beitar, and the smallest of them had not less than three hundred children. They used to say, 'If the enemy comes against us, with these styluses we will go out and stab them!' When, however, [the people's] sins did cause the enemy to come, they enwrapped each pupil in his book and burned him, so that I alone was left.

He applied to himself the verse, My eye affected my soul, because of all the daughters [i.e. inhabitants] of my city."