

In Praise of Bar-Kokhba

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The epigram 'Here in Israel, whoever doesn't believe in miracles is no realist' is attributed to David Ben-Gurion. Clearly, Ben-Gurion's miracle was not some mystical occurrence but rather a natural if unexpected event.

Another example of this type of miracle, in addition to the re-establishment of the Jewish commonwealth in Israel and the rebirth of the Hebrew language, is evident to any visitor to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. There, in the shrine of the Book, to the right of the entrance is an amazing discovery: the Bar-Kokhba letters. The revolt against Rome led by Bar-Kokhba in the years 132-135 was the last full-fledged military campaign launched by Israel until this century. In effect, Bar-Kokhba was the last Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Israel. Some of the letters, addressed to regional commanders at various fortresses, were hidden away in the Judean Desert. One thousand, eight hundred and thirty years passed before they were rediscovered. And by whom? None other than Yigael Yadin who was not only an archeologist, but Israel's first Commander-in-Chief was communicating with the other.

Beyond this seemingly accidental episode is a deep 'miraculous' truth: more than the finding of the letters, more than their being saved at all was the preservation of Israel's military tradition of dazzling accomplishment.

This preface may appear to be miracle-seeking, but it is all about fact. I have used it to introduce my reply to Yehoshafat Harkabi's article in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, issue 24, about the Bar Kokhba Revolt, which I disagree with in all its major theses.

Harkabi's theory is based on the wisdom of hindsight as he himself must surely be aware. Furthermore, his 'wisdom' relates not only to three revolts that failed (one against Babylon, and two against Rome) but to one that was successful – that of the Hasmoneans against the Hellenized Syrians. Harkabi fully justifies the military campaign led by Judas Maccabeus, the reason being simply that it succeeded. He is able to discern the elements of success, *ex post facto*, whence it is equally simple to see the elements of failure. But the decisive question in our study is: was all the data at our disposal now also available to the fighters beforehand?

Harkabi states in the original Hebrew text (of which his *Jerusalem Quarterly* article was an adaptation), that his intention is pragmatic and not historical. He analyzes the defeats of the past in order to learn lessons for the present. His declared identification with the Peace Now movement stems from his view of 'reality' as demanding opposition to those who desire war. This situation for Harkabi is analogous to Jeremiah vs. Zedekiah, Yochanan Ben-Zakai vs. the Zealots and Bar Kokhba. The latter, however, presents a problem because the nation was united behind the leadership of that revolt, militarily as well as spiritually. Harkabi candidly admits that if he had lived then he would himself probably have joined the fight.

The tendency to view the past from the standpoint of the present is not unique to Harkabi. Many scholars and historians, and certainly statesmen, pursue this type of historiography. As long as the facts are correct, there is essentially nothing illegitimate about it. I myself, with much pleasure, have done the same and this was my main intention in editing and writing the three-volume *Chronicles, News of the Past*.

Moreover, concerning Israel's past wars, it was clearly the modern Jewish national movement, Zionism, which effected the positive, even laudatory, interpretation of Israel's struggles for freedom. Talmudic Judaism rejected historiography, perhaps because the Jews appeared to be no more than an object of world history, which was in any case all in the hands of God. This is significant because in debunking the Bar Kokhba revolt Harkabi cites the fact that the Talmudic literature is practically devoid of all mention of the war. If not for the Roman sources, our knowledge of Bar Kokhba would be almost nil, except for several, mostly negative descriptions. These relate to his total reliance on physical might.

There is a 'psychological rejection' at work here, claims Harkabi, spurred by repentance for the participation of the Jewish intellectual elite in the revolt led by Rabbi Akiva. But this attempt at psychological motivation flies in the face of the Talmudic lack of historical orientation. A paucity of information is not unique to the Bar Kokhba episode, but applies equally to other events, such as the Hasmonean revolt. If not for the *Books of the Maccabees*, rejected by the Sages and available to us only in Greek, and, similarly, for Josephus Flavius, we would know next to nothing about the Second Temple period. There is no distinction between different wars but a deliberate ignoring of historical events.

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It is on this basis that one must understand the historiographic reversal that took place in the 19th century which saw a rejection of former concepts and a new perception by the Zionist and nationalist thought regarding the military aspects of our past. Already the Hebrew Enlightenment poets – foremost among them, Yehuda Leib Gordon – dared to attack the religious leaders who saw Jewish life as based on the Torah Commandments as opposed to secularization and productivity. He went further, flourishing his pen against everything that was considered sacred. Thus, Gordon defends Zedekiah in his conflict with Jeremiah whose warnings are proven correct.

Harkabi focuses on Jeremiah's political insight in opposing a revolt against Babylon because he doubts the Egyptian 'ally'. But Jeremiah was not a statesman. It was not the political-military probability that interested the prophets but rather the moral ethical basis in the relationship. This line of thinking, which was common to all the prophets because of their obsession with Egypt and its culture, is but one element of the prophetic outlook. For example: 'Cyrus, he is my shepherd, he shall fulfil all my purpose' (Isaiah 44:28) and 'Assyria, the staff of my fury' (10:5). The gentile nations are viewed as divine tools. The principal reason for natural and political disasters is God's wrath against sinners. And sin is a moral and religious factor. All the prophecies of the destruction relate to moral and religious decadence. The political errors are results of turpitude which is itself a result of degeneracy. One cannot separate any one topic, value or case from the entirety of the prophetic doctrine. If Harkabi accepts Jeremiah in this instance, then he must accept the Jeremiah who speaks of a greater Land of Israel, of Samaria and Gilead settled by Jews. Jeremiah's realism and wisdom cannot be split.

The Zionist movement, in its desire for normalcy and rootedness in the earth of the homeland and its pragmatic approach to miracles, supported the Jewish struggle for political sovereignty. Even the poet Ch. N. Bialik, who tended towards the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Haam, composed a paean to Bar Kokhba. Tchernichovsky, one of the great poets of national rebirth, remarkably has reservations about the Hasmonean revolt because despite its heroism and victory, he views it as a battle for spiritual values and not political freedom. Indeed the first battles were waged against Greek culture, hedonism and the eating of pork. Many would have been satisfied with a spiritual autonomy. Only later came the diplomatic developments that led to the extension of Israel's borders. And are not the reasons for the revolt of any importance? Or can it be judged solely by its outcome?

Take for example the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt. Were they not by force of circumstances commanded to rise up despite any hope of victory? If so, does Harkabi consider the forced eating of pork reason enough to revolt even though at the outset a very small minority supported Matathias and Judah in their partisan, spontaneous campaign? This is a contradiction of the careful and meticulous organization which Harkabi describes regarding Bar Kokhba and his goal of liberating Jerusalem and attested to by the coins of the time.

It was the modern Zionist movement of redemption that made the revolts of the Zealots and Bar Kokhba models for action. The slogan of the Hashomer Watchmen's Society of the Second *Aliyah* period, actually socialist in character, was 'in blood and fire Judea fell, in blood and fire Judea shall arise'. This was not simple romanticism or an attachment to an epic heroic past as opposed to yielding to the will of God and the good graces of the Gentiles, but rather a realistic view of how modern revolutions are made, through wars of national liberation whatever the odds.

As for the Great Revolt, the charges are more straight forward. The Talmud states that the Second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred, referring to the internecine strife even among the Zealots themselves. There was no central or firm leadership, no direction. It was a truly spontaneous, emotional outbreak that led to the revolt itself. But the presentation of Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai as a member of the Peace Faction against Shimon Bar-Giora and Yochanan Gush-Halav, is incorrect. At the start of the all-out fighting, the Sanhedrin High Court of the Pharisees in Jerusalem served as a national government. Yochanan Ben-Zakkai did not oppose this. It was only towards the end, almost in the last year when all hope was lost for military success, that Ben-Zakkai decided to seek a temporary alternative to Jerusalem and the Temple as a way of salvaging his people's religious-spiritual life.

In any case, Harkabi and other Israeli literary figures today misrepresent Yochanan Ben-Zakkai as a sane and wise alternative to the Zealots. It was he who served as the symbol of the preservation of religious Judaism in spite of political defeat. Those who oppose the Zealots' revolt against Rome have two choices: either that of Yavneh which obligates the acceptance of Torah Judaism, or that of Flavius and Agrippas II who joined the camp of Titus in an attempt to save Jerusalem. Yet Harkabi and his supporters do not follow Yochanan Ben-Zakkai or his ideological descendants in the strictest sense, the *Naturei Karta*, who claim that the essence of Judaism is the Torah. Their sentiments lie with Flavius and Agrippas, who admonished the besieged city against bringing down destruction upon the land. Harkabi lacks the courage to admit that Flavius was right and instead, oddly, prefers the figure of Ben-Zakkai.

Today, in cases when there are slim chances for success and anxiety over loss of life and destruction, was not Petain of France justified in surrendering to the Germans and thus saving hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen as well as preserving the country from ruin and Paris from destruction? If France had gone the way of De Gaulle it would have been ravaged; yet Petain was ultimately arrested and tried for treason. This surely must sit uncomfortably with Harkabi's outlook. However, as previously stated, the main interest of Harkabi's book is directed against the Last Revolt, that of Bar Kokhba. It would be easy to cite statements and quotations to counter Harkabi but due to limitations of space I will restrict myself to dealing with the fundamental elements of the problem. Foremost among them is the question of the reasons for the revolt.

This revolt and others all followed the same fundamental principle: the more serious the motivation for the revolt, the more intense it is, and the less sense of probability of success it requires. There is no better example than the Warsaw Ghetto revolt to illustrate this. It was fully justified and even a sacred obligation in spite—or because—of the fact that there was no chance of survival. It follows that there are moments when personal and national honor override all other considerations. A contrasting example is that of the French and Russian Revolutions which erupted at a time when the central authority was so destabilized and corrupt, that all that was needed was a simple push, an initiative where success was assured. The American Revolutionary War needed but a tea tax to set off the spark. Most wars and revolts happen at a middle stage when there are chances but no real assurance, when there is motivation but not necessity. In short, revolt is a function of necessity and probability. The greater the probability, the less the role of necessity. The reverse is true too.

What necessitated the Bar Kokhba revolt beyond the love of liberty itself? Two decrees: the prohibition of the circumcision rite and the plan to turn Jerusalem into a city of idolatry – Aelia Capitolina. The implications of these two edicts for the Jews of that period are clear. I allow myself to presume that also today, even while most of the nation is not religious, promulgations such as those would shock the entire Jewish people. For reference, I turn to the Zionist struggles. The *Irgun* and *Lehi* underground movements fought to expel the British from Palestine. The *Haganah*, and with it the Jewish Agency and its activist David Ben-Gurion, opposed this war, reasoning that it might bring about the destruction of the *Yishuv*. However, even they announced that there were principles they too would fight to protect if necessary, to wit, the right of settlement and open immigration. Thus, when, after the Second World War, British Prime Minister Ernest Bevin decided to keep the gates closed and continue land restrictions, Ben-Gurion ordered the *Haganah* to cooperate with the *Irgun* and *Lehi* despite the fact that in the previous months the dissident underground groups had been hunted down by the same *Haganah*. The object was to foment a resistance movement against the British administration even though the threat of destruction or, at least, severe repressive measures, still existed. In other words, there are indeed matters which one fights for in spite of the danger. It is not difficult, then, to imagine the effect of Rome's two edicts – the paganization of the Holy City and the prohibition of circumcision – on the Jews at that time. The decrees even convinced the opponents of the revolt, the students of that same Yehoshua Ben-Chananya whom Harkabi quotes as a proponent of peace against the revolts twenty years earlier. In addition, Rabbi Akiba joins forces with Bar Kokhba along with his entire camp to the extent of referring to Bar Kokhba as the King-Messiah. Except for one sage, Yochanan Ben-Torata, of lesser importance, there was no opposition to the revolt. There are those who interpret Ben-Torata's words not necessarily as directed against the revolt but in disagreement with Bar Kokhba's elevation to King-Messiah.

Moreover, this was not an emotional reaction or a spontaneous outburst as Harkabi claims but a planned action developed over the ten years prior to 132 CE. This was distinct from the Great Revolt just as the unity of the people under the joint spiritual and practical leadership was different, in the main, due to Rabbi Akiba's personality.

As for the element of probability, I noted above that the two anti-Jewish decrees were enough to bring a people like the Jews to revolt. Being a nation faithful to its beliefs and covenant and to Jerusalem as the geographical center of its hopes and holiness, even less probability would have brought about the armed struggle. But we cannot ignore the probability factor. During the years of the revolt there was a sort of 'detente' between Rome and the Parthian Empire in the east though a certain tension existed all the while, with eruptions of violence and cease-fires. Historians such as Weber and Momson assign the failure of Rome to subjugate Parthia to the Jewish revolts in North Africa and Cyprus during 114-117 when Quietus was forced to recall his armies from the East. The Bar Kokhba revolt forced Hadrian to finally give up all thought of conquering the East. There were indications that together with the Revolt, Parthia might join in the fighting against Rome. In Europe there was constant disturbance by tribes of barbarians. (In my Hebrew-language book: *Debate: the Destruction and its Lessons*, there is a short monograph by David Rokeach of the Hebrew University which describes in detail the unrest at the time of the revolt.)

Additional testimony to the success probability is the tremendous effort invested by Hadrian to crush the revolt. Over half the legions at his disposal are thrown into the fray coming from the far reaches of the empire. He himself encamps in Transjordan and calls one of his greatest commanders, Severus, all the way from Britain. The Roman sources themselves relate that the victory cost him so dearly that he omitted the traditional formula when reporting to the Senate that 'I and my army are well'.

The defeat of Bar Kokhba was awesome in its ferocity: it could be that if Bar Kokhba knew what Harkabi now knows, he might have chosen a more opportune moment. The edicts in the post-revolt period were particularly harsh due to Hadrian's anger over his heavy losses. That same Talmud which Harkabi quotes so often to blacken Bar Kokhba's name knows something about Hadrian's relationship to the Jews. The Midrash relates that Hadrian met a Jew who failed to salute him. The ruler ordered the Jew killed. A second Jew, having observed what happened to his fellow religionist, hastened to greet Hadrian. But the result was identical and he too was put to death. Hadrian's advisers were perplexed and inquired about his behavior. Hadrian's reply was simple: 'Don't tell me how to deal with my enemies.'

This is how we have been treated throughout our years of exile: hated for both our exclusiveness and our assimilation, our capitalism and our communism, our dispersion and our clannishness, our weakness and our strength. This is not the place for dealing with the irrationality of anti-Semitism. It is apparent, though, that there are immeasurable powerful forces within us that mark us as the object of hatred for the world's leaders since Nimrod cast Abraham into the furnace following the smashing of the idols. The Aggadic episode illustrates the historic truth of our existence among the Gentiles.

In conclusion, I wish to return to the Israel Museum, where our discussion began. In the Museum is an impressive statue of Hadrian found several years ago in the Beth Shean Valley. The statue portrays a handsome figure in bronze even though we are referring to the emperor who defeated Bar Kokhba, changed Jerusalem into Aelia Capitolina and attempted to erase the memory of Judea by replacing it with Syria Palestina. He destroyed, according to Roman sources, over 900 communities and killed 500,000 Jews. And now his statue rests in the Israel Museum and I recommend that Jews everywhere come here and approach him, and look into his empty eye sockets and ask: 'Hadrian, O' Hadrian, where are you now? In Aelia Capitolina? In Palestine? Or perhaps in Jerusalem, capital of Israel. Where is your empire and where are we? Despite all we have suffered by your hands too.'

Come O man of Israel, O Jew from wherever you are, present yourself before this statue and know all the tragedies of our people and its strength.

It is almost superfluous to add that there are lessons to be learnt and that there are analogies for the present. This was the case when we rebelled against the British Empire that ruled here and desired to establish a Palestine in place of Judea. We revolted and we overcame them because of preferential conditions. But nothing was assured and much was at risk.

With all this, no analogy exists to our struggle with the Palestinian Arabs. They are not a world power. And this is a different battle entirely. What is realistic and what is unrealistic, only reality will judge. Herzl was unbalanced in the eyes of the majority of the realists. Zionism itself, and we of the underground, were certainly a small minority. And what united all the Zionist camps was the education we received concerning those great and tragic rebels of antiquity.