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## Authority and Dissent in Jewish Life

Leonard Greenspoon

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# Authority and Dissent in Jewish Life

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 31

Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Symposium of  
the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization, the Harris  
Center for Judaic Studies, and the Schwalb Center for  
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Authority and Dissent  
in Jewish Life

Studies in Jewish Civilization  
Volume 31

Editor:  
Leonard J. Greenspoon

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization

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THE 31ST ANNUAL Symposium on Jewish Civilization took place on Sunday, October 28, and Monday, October 29, 2018, in Omaha, Nebraska. The title of the symposium, from which this volume also takes its name, was “Authority and Dissent in Jewish Life.” All of the papers collected here are based on presentations at the symposium itself.

The academic sponsors of this symposium represent three major institutions of higher learning in Nebraska: Creighton University (the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization, the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society), the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (the Harris Center for Judaic Studies), and the University of Nebraska Omaha (the Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies).

In large measure, the symposium owes its success to two groups of dedicated and talented individuals. First are my academic colleagues: Dr. Ronald Simkins (Creighton University), Dr. Jean Cahan (University of Nebraska–Lincoln), and Dr. Curtis Hutt (University of Nebraska Omaha). To use language drawn from this volume’s title: we exercise our collective authority collaboratively and creatively; dissent ensures that we consistently maintain individual and institutional integrity.

The second group consists of people who really know how to get things done. From Creighton, there is Colleen Hastings; from UNO, Kasey De Goey; and from the Omaha Jewish Federation, Jennie Gates Beckman. Their unexcelled excellence adds luster to every symposium-related activity.

The publication schedule we devised with Purdue University Press results in a period of two years between each symposium and its volume. My friends outside the world of education are always asking, What takes so long? My academic colleagues know well



that our publications are exemplary in both the speed with which they appear and the quality of their contents. This is possible only because of the high level of dedication and professionalism displayed by the staff at Purdue University Press, with whom we have had an excellent relationship for more than a decade.

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

**R**ELIGIOUS LEADERS. POLITICAL leaders. Military leaders. They have been among the most prominent members of the establishment, Jewish and non-Jewish, for millennia. From their positions (elected, appointed, or stolen) they have exercised authority, which has on occasion been met with dissent.

As I reflected one last time on the essays in this volume and the symposium where presenters made their presentations, I was once again struck by how universal and yet distinctively Jewish so many phenomena are at one and the same time. As has been the case before, so here too it seems like a swatch of autobiography most efficiently makes the point.

Many years ago, sometime in the 1980s, I was president of the Conservative synagogue in Greenville, South Carolina. Because the membership numbers were relatively modest, I was able to pass through the various stages of the *cursus honorum*, from member at large to president, while I was still a pretty young guy. But because of the time—1950s and '60s—and the place—Richmond, Virginia—of my upbringing, I was especially attuned to the nuances of deference I was expected to pay to those older than myself.

Giving senior members of the congregation essentially *carte blanche* to discourse on any topic for almost any amount of time led not surprisingly to very long meetings. (Come to think of it, why did they ever reelect me?!) Very quickly I observed that the older males (rarely females) on the board could talk with seemingly great authority on just about any theme, secular or religious, I could imagine. And, of course, some topics I would never have thought of. Their authority as promoters of a given set of beliefs was invariably matched by others who held out in dissent.

How, I wondered, could everyone know just about everything, pro and con, on any and every topic? Of course, I was young and naïve then. But the question still intrigues me. Is there a special type of authority and expression of dissent that Jews characteristically voice? The answer I got then, which fit its context pretty well, went something like this: “Each of us board members started and grew a small business. We could figure it out in the office or store. And we could figure it out in shul or synagogue. No one could tell us anything we didn’t already know. Although we were blessed, if you will, with a unique knack for lighting the way of our otherwise unenlightened colleagues.”

It seemed about right to me then—each individual developed a unique quality of authority based largely on his own unique experience. And when, as inevitably occurred, there was a clash of authority derived from a righteous sense of dissent, how was resolution achieved? As I remember it, the clamor of thunderous rhetoric on often the most seemingly picayune point was resolved only by the infinitive patience of our ever-nimble young hero—I mean me.

If, as I do, you sometimes appreciate the ad hoc (if not ad hominem) nature of such vignettes, we can agree that this mid-1980s account from Upstate South Carolina is an at least adequate reflection of a given set of circumstances as experienced and recalled by one individual.

I make no excuses for that. But I also offer sincerest personal and professional gratitude to the more than a dozen of my colleagues who bring the range of their scholarship as well as their storytelling to instances of authority and dissent in over two millennia of Jewish life. That is what this book is all about.

The first four essays look back to historical accounts from rabbinic through the Byzantine period. First is “Figurative Language of Authority and Rebellion in the Story of the Death of Rabbi Judah ben Bava” by Chen Marx, The Max Stern Yezreel Valley College. In his essay Marx examines the martyrological tale of Rabbi Judah ben Bava, who was brutally murdered by the Romans after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (136 CE) as punishment for ordaining five of his disciples as rabbis, an action that preserved the Jewish faith. The tales of ben Bava deal with how his memory should be preserved. Marx enumerates the ways rabbinic figurative language represents ideological struggles and how the Jewish religion has faced and interpreted rebellion, failure, and victory.

Azzan Yadin-Israel, Rutgers University, offers the second study, on “Midrash, Oral Law, and the Question of Rabbinic Authority.” As Yadin-Israel explicates, the early rabbis are characterized in two ways: they are masters of midrash and they are adherents of the Oral Law, a tradition handed down from master to disciple that stretches back to Moses himself. What is generally overlooked is the potential incommensurability of these claims: each implies a different model of religious authority. As a result, there can be disputes between them. Yadin-Israel traces the contours of this foundational

struggle in the rabbinic sources and the ultimate triumph of midrash and decline of Oral Law as a source of authority.

In "Dissenting Literature and Social Formation in the Antique Mediterranean," Zachary B. Smith, Creighton University, expands the basis of our analysis through his exploration of some of the issues of written dissent in texts from the classical and late antique periods. Persuasive literature was the primary vehicle in the process of elite social formation. While not a genre per se, dissent literature was a subset of persuasive literature that attempted to mitigate the effects of authoritative literature. Dissent literature employed a variety of tactics, from ad hominem attacks to intellectual disputes. In Smith's analysis, the kinds of persuasion used in dissent literature tell us something about the conditions, positions, and dispositions of the authoritative and dissenting parties.

Joel Gereboff, Arizona State University, then asks us to consider the nature of King David in "When the Memory of David Is Not Enough to Authenticate the Temple in Jerusalem." Gereboff first shows how King David's connection to the building of the Temple in Jerusalem is described somewhat differently in biblical texts. Rabbinic sources assigned a greater role to David. Some midrashim specifically asserted that in Solomon's time the Temple gates opened only when David was actually present either by bringing in his coffin or through his revival. Thus, the invoking of David's memory alone was not seen as sufficient. Gereboff then correlates these Jewish traditions with developments in the Byzantine era, when they were written.

The next two essays, by Ori Z. Soltes, Georgetown University, and Gil Graff, *Builders of Jewish Education*, are far-reaching in their chronological and methodological range. Soltes titles his essay "From Acosta and Spinoza to Arendt to Laurence and Aylon: Verbiage and Visual Art as Instruments of Dissent in Modern Jewish Thought." Through discussion, disagreement, and dissent, rabbinic literature offered multiple perspectives on every issue. As Soltes shows, one consequence of this was that the concept of "heresy" did not functionally exist within Judaism. The first notable instances of accusations of heresy were against Uriel Acosta and Baruch Spinoza in seventeenth century Amsterdam. Centuries later, Hannah Arendt and Geoff Laurence embodied Spinoza-like modes of dissent from accepted understandings of Holocaust trauma. Later, Helène Aylon addressed the very concept of dissent against traditionally conceived rabbinic authority.

The title of Graff's study, which was the symposium's keynote presentation, was "Jewish Law and the Law of the State: A Study in Authority and Dissent." Graff observes that from Talmudic times the principle "the law of the kingdom is the law" framed the relationship of Jews and Judaism to the ruling power. With the onset of modernity, state jurisdiction extended to matters long left to religious authorities.

Napoleon brought the issue of defining church-state relationships to a head. In the modern era, “the law of the kingdom is the law” was variously invoked, as Jews charted divergent paths. Echoes of nineteenth and twentieth century debates reverberate today.

The next four essays cover distinctive developments from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in Europe and the United States. Motti Zalkin, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, explores “‘The Terrible Animal Known as the Masses’: The Status and Authority of the Community Rabbi in Nineteenth Century Eastern Europe.” The status of the community rabbi and his relations, both tension and cooperation, with local elites in his community has been discussed extensively in historical research. This situation changed dramatically with the rise of “the politics of the masses” in the second half of nineteenth century Europe. Traditional elites rapidly lost their exclusive status; the voice of the middle and sometimes lower classes was heard. In his essay Zalkin focuses attention on the impact of this process on the public status of the community rabbi.

Theodore Albrecht, Kent State University, follows with a musically themed study titled “Thumbing Mendelssohn’s Nose at the Nazis: Hans Pfitzner’s Symphony in C, Op. 46 (1940).” Paul Cossmann (1869–1942) and Hans Pfitzner (1869–1949) grew up as friends in Frankfurt, Germany. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they arrested Cossmann, who was Jewish, for his writings. Pfitzner interceded on Cossmann’s behalf. When the Nazis asked Pfitzner for new music to Shakespeare’s popular “*Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” he replied that he could never improve upon that written by the Jewish Mendelssohn. In 1940, Pfitzner wrote a Symphony in C, using a disguised theme from Mendelssohn’s beloved Italian Symphony as a defiant gesture against the Nazi regime.

Victoria Khiterer, Millersville University, takes a close look at “Not So Silent: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Kiev, 1945–1970s.” In the second half of the 1930s–1940s, Soviet authorities sought to close Jewish scholarly, educational, and cultural organizations. In this essay, Khiterer examines official Soviet reports showing that, in spite of these efforts, a significant percentage of Kievan Jews continued to attend synagogue or clandestine minyanim after the Second World War and celebrated Jewish religious holidays. The authorities deprived accreditations of several Kiev rabbis, but religious life continued even without a rabbi in Kiev. The Kiev synagogue became the place of dissent and spiritual resistance against Soviet state antisemitism and assimilation policy.

In “When Authority Was a Form of Dissent: Postwar Guides to Reform Practice,” Joan S. Friedman, College of Wooster, looks at a phenomenon of post–World War II America. In Friedman’s analysis, Reform Judaism’s perpetual paradox is that a Jewish movement rooted in rejection of halachic authority nevertheless requires modes of communal religious behavior and agreed-upon methods of determining what those behaviors should be. The quarter century after World War II brought the publication of

the first books on Reform practice. Each of their rabbinic authors sought to offer ritual guidance to Reform Jews as well as to establish the theoretical basis for offering such guidance and the extent to which it could be “authoritative” within the Reform context.

The final four essays of this collection bring us up to the first decades of the twenty-first century. Eitan Abramovitch, *The Institution for the Advancement of Rav Shagar's Writings*, provides a close reading of a key element in the writing of Rav Shagar in “‘Dispute for the Sake of Heaven’: Dissent and Multiplicity in Rav Shagar's Thought.” Rav Shagar (Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, 1949–2007) was one of the most original thinkers in Modern Orthodoxy. The central place that he gives to concepts like dissent, dispute, and multiplicity is one of the innovative elements of his thought. Instead of striving for harmony, he prefers multiplicity and even dissent. He connects this attitude to the central place of multiplicity in postmodern philosophy. His influence can be demonstrated, for example, in the claim that the ability to live with multiplicity can open new ways for the coexistence of Jews and Palestinians.

Shlomo Abramovich, Ariel University, introduces another Israeli development in “Limiting the Authority of the Country: Disobedience in the IDF.” The history of Israel is full of examples of disobedience and refusal of soldiers motivated morally and ideologically. On the right, it is most often refusal to participate in the evacuation of Jewish settlements. Abramovich's essay focuses on the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, when discussions about refusal, especially among Religious Zionists, raised fundamental questions like these: What is the importance of the State of Israel and what are the limitations of its authority? What happens when there is a contradiction between the country and its institutions (like the army) and Jewish values?

Mark Trencher, Nishma Research, provides the results of quantitative research in his essay, “Leaving the Fold: Dissent from Communal Authority in the Orthodox World?” The objective of the quantitative research Trencher conducted was to understand why people are leaving Orthodoxy and to explore the extent to which such leaving represents dissent from community authority figures and/or normative behaviors versus their being lured out by the external world. Trencher's research showed that for every ten responses citing outside societal attractions as a “luring factor,” there were seventeen citing a communal element from which the departed were dissenting as a “repelling factor.” For the American Orthodox population, departure is ultimately how they often manifest dissent.

In the volume's last essay, Lindsey Jackson, Concordia University, introduces readers to “Brit without Milah: Adapting and Remixing the Dominant Ritual System.” The debate about male circumcision has garnered increased attention, permeating the Jewish community and propelling some Jews to action. Focusing on Jews in Canada and the United States, Jackson's research consists of an ethnographic study of Jewish

parents and their engagement with, adaptation of, or rejection of brit milah. Using non-circumcision Jews as the focus of this analysis, she argues that they are challenging authority, reclaiming power, and demanding change by opting out of brit milah and creating alternative rituals that are better suited to their ethical concerns about circumcision and unique understandings of Judaism.

Leonard J. Greenspoon

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# FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF AUTHORITY AND REBELLION IN THE STORY OF THE DEATH OF RABBI JUDAH BEN BAVA

CHEN MARX

## INTRODUCTION

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails well planted are the words of masters of assemblies, they were given by one shepherd. (Eccl 12:11)

SOLOMON, THE PRESUMED author of Ecclesiastes, refers here to the words of wise men, likening them to a whip used to drive a plowing ox and to nails well planted, both used by one master, viz. God.<sup>1</sup>

In the Talmudic period, the sages interpreted this metaphor from Ecclesiastes as follows:

[You might think that] just as the nail only diminishes [as it is driven into a material] and does not increase, so, too, the words of the Torah only diminish and do not increase—therefore the text says: “well planted.” Just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of Torah grow and increase. (*b. Hag. 3a*)

This is a perplexing midrash. How is the Torah comparable to a nail? And what does the body that the nail penetrates represent?<sup>2</sup>

These questions illustrate the difficulty we face when we encounter figurative language. It is figurative language that will be at the center of this essay.<sup>3</sup>

This essay discusses the Bar Kokhba Revolt and its repercussions. It focuses on the way in which the sages described the harsh reality of their time in similes and how, at the end of this process, these similes became reality itself.<sup>4</sup> The essay also examines how the sages dealt with a crisis that reality put in their way and how literature and figurative language played a significant role in the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Lastly, it considers a possible answer to the question What is the significance of the nails to which the Torah was likened in the midrash that we have read?

## THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

The historical background of the stories we will deal with is the destruction of the Second Temple, which occurred in 70 CE, and the subsequent Bar Kokhba Revolt, which occurred in the years 132–136 CE.

The Jews' Great Revolt against Rome took place in 70 CE. It was not a planned revolt. No clear leadership directed it. No preparations were made for it. It broke out almost spontaneously. Ultimately, four years after it had begun, the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, conquered the city, and burned the Temple.<sup>5</sup>

It is hard for us today to comprehend the full impact of the destruction of the Temple. Fundamentally, the very existence of the Temple validates the covenant between God and Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Temple renews the covenant on a daily basis through the sacrificial worship. Moreover, the sacrifices purify the Temple and allow God to reside in it. Each and every day sacrifices were made in the Temple to cleanse the people of Israel of their sins, making them a holy people with whom God himself could have a covenant, a people within whom he can reside.

This is how it is described in the Book of Exodus: "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Exod 25:8). The Temple was the nexus around which the people of Israel came together socially, politically, and religiously. Its existence should have been as eternal as the covenant between God and Israel itself. The physical structure of the Temple was a tangible representation of that covenant.

One can only imagine their shock when the people of Israel learned that the Temple had been destroyed. They must have struggled to understand what such an event could signify.

On the face of it, the destruction of the Temple meant that the covenant itself had been invalidated. However, the people of Israel could rely on a historical precedent for the destruction of the Second Temple: the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. More importantly, they could rely on its reconstruction seventy years later, the result of the seemingly miraculous decree by Cyrus the Great, king of Persia.

The people of Israel knew that the Temple had been destroyed and rebuilt once before. This fact proved to be fateful. To understand its significance, we must first present the notion of cyclical history and its relation to the Bible.

## CYCLICAL HISTORY

Rabbinic thought considered the Torah to be as eternal as God. This implied that reading the Bible could teach a person not only what has happened in the past, but also what is happening in the present and what will happen in the future.<sup>7</sup>

This means that if the First Temple was destroyed and then rebuilt seventy years later, it was reasonable to assume that a Third Temple would be built seventy years after the destruction of the Second. Put simply, the Third Temple would be built in 140 CE.

It is no surprise, then, that sixty-two years after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews launched a new revolt—the Bar Kokhba Revolt—hoping that the Third Temple would be rebuilt in due time.

## THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT

The Bar Kokhba Revolt was based on the assumption that a new Temple would be built seventy years after the destruction of the last, just as happened after the first destruction in the sixth century BCE.

Unlike the revolt that led to the destruction of the Second Temple, the Bar Kokhba Revolt was well organized, and it was led by a man whom the sages believed to be the Messiah: “When Rabbi Akiva would see Bar Kuzeva [the name by which the Talmud refers to Bar Kokhba, often understood to mean Son of Falsehood] he would say—“This is the King Messiah.”” (*J. Ta’an.* 4). Yet, though the revolt was well planned and organized, and despite the messianic hopes placed on it, and despite all the Jewish victories and the many Roman casualties, the Jews lost.

The Romans were hardly gracious victors. The Roman historian Cassius Dio claims that 580,000 Jews died during the suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (a rough estimate puts this as 40 percent of the Jews living in the Land of Israel at the time). Five hundred Jewish forts were taken, and a thousand Jewish villages were razed to the ground.<sup>8</sup> Rabbinic literature describes the killings as creating rivers of blood:

And they [the Romans] would kill them [the Jews] and continue until the horse would sink in blood to its muzzle. And the blood would roll rocks the size of forty seah [a unit of volume, approximately eight liters], until the blood flowed

four miles into the sea; and lest you say it is near the sea, it is forty miles from the sea. (*J. Ta'an.* 24b)

But the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt must be measured by more than its casualty statistics. The real tragedy of the Bar Kokhba Revolt was the loss of Torah.

To properly understand this phrase, “loss of Torah,” we must first say a few words about the concept of the Oral Torah. Today, if we were to go to the library and ask librarians for the Jews’ Oral Torah, they would lead us to shelves of rabbinic literature and show us such collections as the Mishnah, the Talmud, or the Midrash. In effect, they would be taking us to books written after 220 CE.

Today, the Oral Torah is not oral. It is written. But before 220 CE it was, quite literally, oral. Writing it down was forbidden. In other words, unlike the Bible (the written Torah), the innovations of the sages (the Oral Torah) were not allowed to be written.<sup>9</sup>

After the destruction of the Second Temple there was a tremendous blossoming of literature created by the sages.<sup>10</sup> The sages led the people with their words, but their words could not be written down. The sages’ actions, which were basically verbal, remained intangible, and the only way to preserve them was through memory. And so, each sage embodied the Torah itself. He embodied, produced, and memorized the Torah. He replaced the written book—he was the written book.<sup>11</sup>

By the time the Bar Kokhba Revolt was over, some 40 percent of the Jewish people in Judea had died at the hands of the Romans. This statistic encompasses every part of the population: 40 percent of the sages, who produced and memorized the Torah, were among the dead. In other words, the Romans quite literally destroyed 40 percent of the Oral Torah, the very Torah that the sages had created up until that time.

It should be noted that the Torah—both Written and Oral—was believed to be eternal. The Torah was supposed to protect its bearers and could not be destroyed—it must be everlasting. And yet, following the Bar Kokhba Revolt, the survivors discovered that the Torah could be destroyed, quite easily, and that it did not protect the sages.<sup>12</sup>

## THE DEATH OF R. BEN BAVA

Rabbi Judah ben Bava lived after the Bar Kokhba Revolt had been suppressed. He experienced the decrees enacted by the Romans following the Revolt.<sup>13</sup> One of these was a prohibition on the ordination or appointment of new sages. The punishment for violating this prohibition was death. Despite this decree, R. ben Bava ordained five disciples:

Rab Judah said [the following] in the name of Rab: “Verily that man, R. Judah ben Bava by name, be remembered for good, for were it not for him the laws of fines

would have been forgotten in Israel.” [The Talmud then asks:] ‘Forgotten’? Surely, they could be studied? [And so, the Talmud corrects itself:] Nay, they would have been abolished. (*b. Abod. Zar.* 8b).

What the Talmud meant is that there would no longer be any dayanim [judges] ordained to rule in such cases. This is how it happened:

For the wicked Government of Rome issued a decree that he who ordains a Rabbi shall be slain, likewise he who is ordained shall be put to death, the town in which an ordination takes place shall be destroyed and the *tehum* [region, municipality] in which the ordination is held shall be laid waste.

What did R. Judah ben Bava do? He went and sat between two mountains and between two large towns, between two *tehums* [municipalities], namely, between [the towns of] Usha and Shefar’am, and there he ordained five elders: R. Meir, R. Judah [b. Il’ai], R. Jose, R. Simeon and R. Eleazar b. Shammua. R. Awia adds: also R. Nehemiah.

On seeing that they were detected by the enemies, he [R. ben Bava] said to them, “Flee, my children!” But they said to him, “And you, O Rabbi, what about you?” “I,” he replied, “will lie still before them as a stone that cannot be moved.” It was stated that the Romans did not move from there until they drove three hundred iron spears into his body and made his corpse like a sieve! (*b. Abod. Zar.* 8b)<sup>14</sup>

The story presents the protagonist R. ben Bava as concerned with the general welfare of the people. Although he is aware of the persecution and the threat of death, he is able to find creative solutions to the problems that circumstances put in his way. This is why he does not ordain his disciples within the limits of any specific city. This way, the Romans would have no grounds to punish the residents of any specific city. Despite the Roman threat, R. ben Bava ensures the continuity of Torah, at the price of his own continuity, by this act of ordaining his disciples.

Figurative language plays an important role in the story:

On seeing that they were detected by the enemies, he [R. ben Bava] said to them, “Flee, my children!” But they said to him, “And you, O Rabbi, what about you?” “I,” he replied, “will lie still before them as a stone that cannot be moved.” It was stated that the Romans did not move from there until they drove three hundred iron spears into his body and made his corpse like a sieve! (*b. Abod. Zar.* 8b)

This dialogue between the disciples and R. ben Bava is full of difficulties. For one, the disciples’ question, “What about you,” is ambiguous. Are they asking “What will become of you” or perhaps “What will you do”? The fact that R. ben Bava chose to answer in figurative language, “I will lie still before them . . . as a stone that cannot be

moved,” only intensifies this difficulty. It is unclear what the disciples meant by their question and what R. ben Bava meant by his answer.<sup>15</sup>

This is because his answer is a simile. R. ben Bava depicted himself as a large, heavy stone, immovable and impenetrable. And this simile can be contrasted with another simile, one created by the Romans through their actions in the world. Put differently, while R. ben Bava presented himself as solid, stable, and immobile, the simile presented to the reader by the Romans is that of a sieve: a mobile, pierced, and penetrated object.

This creates two frames of reality: the first is the immediate reality in the world of action—R. ben Bava’s body, pierced like a sieve. In contrast to this simile stands the one R. ben Bava uses for himself—an unturned stone. This simile represents the other frame of reality—the future one, which will come to be long after the Romans disappear and their persecution will cease. It is a frame of reality we are exposed to in light of the entire segment.

R. ben Bava’s simile was triumphant. In the reader’s reality, laws concerning fines ultimately survived thanks to R. ben Bava’s sacrifice. Thus, his teaching and actions were as eternal as an immovable rock.

While it is true that in this clash of similes the one created by the Romans was triumphant for a brief time, it was the simile proposed by R. ben Bava that achieved a permanent victory. R. ben Bava’s pierced and bleeding body disappears and is replaced by the simile of an immovable and impenetrable rock. Furthermore, it offers insight into the true status of the Torah. If originally we thought that it met its demise with the death of this righteous man, this story consoles us by saying that the Torah lives on. Not only does it survive, but it also spreads and gains followers, thanks to the actions of this righteous man just prior to his death.

## CALCULATING THE LEAP YEAR IN BIQ’AT RIMON

I would now like to turn to another story, this one from the Jerusalem Talmud. It features most of the disciples ordained by R. ben Bava:<sup>16</sup>

R. Yona [said] in the name of R. Hiyya bar Ba: It so happened that seven elders came to calculate the leap year in Biq’at Rimón. And who were they? R. Meir, and R. Yehuda, and R. Yossi, and R. Shim’on, R. Nehemia, and R. Eliezar ben Ya’akov, and R. Yochanan the Shoemaker. (*j. Hag.* 3a)

Note that four sages from this list were ordained by R. ben Bava, excluding R. Nehemiah, who some claim was also ordained at the same time. In any case, this group

includes four out of the five disciples whom R. ben Bava had ordained just before he was killed by the Romans.

The action they are performing here would determine the precise dates of the holidays. Just like ordination, it was forbidden in the persecution that followed the failed Bar Kokhba Revolt. By their very action, these disciples were returning national and religious authority to the Land of Israel.<sup>17</sup> Their action signified the end of the period of persecution.

And they were calculating the leap year. . . . And left with a kiss, and whoever did not have cover—his friend would cut off some of his cover and give him. (*j. Hag. 3a*)

Note the relationship between the sages R. ben Bava ordained. They are not entangled in power struggles. Rather, they cooperate and share an interdependent relationship and kiss each other when they part ways. It seems that they coalesced as a group as a result of the adversities they faced immediately after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

But just before they part, they do something else: “When they were about to go they said: ‘Let us show what we have done’” (*j. Hag. 3a*). The sages say: we want to show our actions and achievements to the living, so that they may see what we have done. Torah, however, is abstract—it has no physical form in the world. Calculating the leap year has no tangible shape. The sages are trying to illustrate an abstract idea in the physical world.

And this is what they do: And there was a rock of marble there, and each took one nail and fixed it in it, and it sunk in it, as in dough, and even today it is called the hobnailed rock. (*j. Hag. 3a*)

The sages ordained by R. ben Bava create a monument to represent their action. They take an abstract, shapeless action and present it in the tangible form of the material world. As a symbol, the disciples choose a marble rock, just like the immovable rock to which R. ben Bava had likened himself.

The sages approach this rock and drive iron nails into it, just as the Romans drove their spears into R. ben Bava’s body. The Roman simile of the penetrated body and R. ben Bava’s simile of himself as an unmovable rock are intertwined to relay an entirely new message.

In this system of similies, the marble rock represents R. ben Bava. But it would be wrong to think of him as an ordinary man. He is not just a man. In this context R. ben Bava is the very sages that he ordained. He is the embodiment of the Torah that he taught and created.

Ben Bava’s disciples choose a marble rock as a symbol for him, a marble rock that had been penetrated not by enemies but by the very disciples that he himself had



ordained. The sharp iron implements, which pierce and penetrate the rock, do not symbolize the Roman spears but rather the new Torah that the disciples ordained by R. ben Bava created. The action of driving the nails into the marble rock does not take Torah away from it. Instead, it adds a new dimension to it, which was not there before.

In that sense, it echoes the metaphor from Ecclesiastes, with which we opened the essay, and the midrash from the Babylonian Talmud, which expounded on it:

[You might think that] just as the nail only diminishes [as it is driven into a material] and does not increase, so, too, the words of the Torah only diminish and do not increase—therefore the text says: “well planted,” Just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of Torah grow and increase. (*b. Hag. 3a*)

When a person hammers a nail into the wall, the material removed from it forms a pile of dust on the floor below. The Torah is likened to a nail here, but it does not remove anything from the wall it penetrates. On the contrary, it adds to it. When R. ben Bava’s disciples want to demonstrate their actions, they liken themselves to nails penetrating a marble rock. In so doing they reenact the scene in which they became sages, at the price of losing their Rabbi, the one who ordained them. Seemingly, the Torah had been lost then. Seemingly, it had died. However, even though at that moment it seemed as if the Torah was destroyed, it lived on. Not only it had not been diminished in the slightest, but the sages ordained by R. ben Bava had increased it. Just as they increased the rock by adding the nails to it, they had added new Torah to the existing one.

## CONCLUSION

When a revolt such as the Bar Kokhba Revolt fails, the believers face several fundamental questions. How could a revolt that was both political and religious have failed? How could the Torah embodied in the sages suffer bitter defeat and be put to death? Who is truly in control of the world: those who use force to shape the material world, or those who live in a world of similes and shape reality through words?

From the stories we have read, we can conclude that when reality becomes too hard to bear, the world of similes blossoms. Reality is presented as more than what it first seems to be. There is an entirely different world behind it, an invisible world described through figurative language.

The stories we have just examined describe the path taken by a simile, from the world of reality to the world of figurative language and from the world of figurative language back to reality. Put differently, in the stories we have just read, the simile gains a body and a presence in reality.<sup>18</sup> In that process, the dead, pierced man really does become

a stone, unharmed and undiminished by the iron spears. In fact, the iron nails do not diminish but increase the Torah that he embodied.

## NOTES

1. This verse can also be interpreted to mean the barbs at the end of the whip.
2. In the following paragraph I take a similar approach to David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies (Rethinking Theory)* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 19–21, in which Stern interprets the sages' commentary on Ecclesiastes.  
The traditional approach, however, satisfies itself with understanding the simile of a nail as a well-planted, immovable object. See, for example, the words of Azariah dei Rossi, "As are the commandments . . . as nails planted in our hearts," in Reuven Bonfil, ed., *The Writings of Azariah dei Rossi* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institution, 1991), 172, and the footnote there.
3. Literary scholarship has taken a number of approaches to figurative language, beginning with the distinction between a symbol and an allegory in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. J. Osborne; New York and London: Verso, 1977), 177–78. This was followed by Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight, Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228. Later extensive research was conducted in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See them for additional references.
4. In my Ph.D. thesis I expounded on the way sages considered figurative language, similes, and metaphors. See Chaim Natan Marx, "Bound Phrases: The Question of Similarity and Association in the Tales of the Sages in the Babylonian Talmud" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, 2011), 238–41. See also Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 34–38, 66; as well as David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Gail Labovitz, "The Language of the Bible and the Language of the Rabbis: A Linguistic Look at Kiddushin, Part 1," *Conservative Judaism* 63:1 (2011): 25–42, and additional references there.
5. Menahem Mor, who was kind enough to join us in the conference on the Bar Kokhba Revolt and its historic causes, writes on the subject in Menahem Mor, "The Second Jewish Revolt: The Bar Kokhba War, 132–136 CE," in *The Brill Reference Library of Judaism*, vol. 50 (ed. Alan Avery-Peck, et al.; Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016, 51–145). See also additional references there. In recent years there has been a revival in the research on the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Scholars emphasize elements overlooked by their

predecessors and manipulations in scholarship itself, manipulations stemming from the national needs of past scholars. See the work done by Haim Weiss, e.g., Haim Weiss, “There Was a Man in Israel—Bar-Kosibah Was His Name!” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21:2 (2001): 99–115.

6. For the way the Temple embodies the covenant, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (trans. S. Emanuel; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
7. See also David Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 14–38.
8. For more on Cassius Dio, see Fergus Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). For a full review of Dio’s comments on the revolt and their historical reliability, see the second chapter in Menahem Mor, “The Second Jewish Revolt,” in which an entire section is dedicated to the subject. See also Menahem Mor, “Are There Any New Factors Concerning the Bar-Kokhba Revolt?” *Studia Antiqua et Archaeologica* 18:1 (2012): 161–93.
9. See *b. Tem.* 14b for a discussion of this issue and of the reasons for the writing of the Oral Torah despite the prohibition.
10. In the absence of the religious center—the Temple—which was controlled by the priests, the sages became the leading religious authority. See Robert T. Herford, *The Effect of the Fall of Jerusalem upon the Character of the Pharisees* (London: Society of Hebraic Studies, 1917), 3–22. See also Shaye J. D. Cohen, “The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984): 27–53; and Israel L. Levin, *The Place of Sages in the Land of Israel in Talmudic Times* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1986), 8–9, 130–31.
11. See a discussion of a similar case in Devora Steinmentz, “Like Torah Scrolls That Are Rolled Up: The story of the Death of Rabbi Eliezer in Sanhedrin 68a,” in *Tiferet Leyisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus* (ed. Joel Roth, et al.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2010), 153–79.
12. Many stories in rabbinic literature refer to this phenomenon of the death of Torah through the death of the sage. One feature is the recurring phrase “such Torah and such a reward.” This phrase is repeated when a sage who was killed by the Romans is discussed. The word “such” is used deictically here. It refers to the actual dead body of the sage. The phrase “such Torah and such a reward” means “this is not a dead person, but a dead Torah.” If it is Torah, how can this be the reward Torah itself receives? See Marx, *Bound Phrases*, 300–13, and references there.
13. The edicts of persecution issued in the days of Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE) were laws meant to eradicate the Jewish faith. See Yosef Dan, “Pirkey Hekhlol Rabbati and the Ten Martyrs,” *Eshel Beer Sheva* 2 (1981): 63–80; and Solomon Zeitlin, “The Legend of The Ten Martyrs and Its Apocalyptic Origins,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1945): 1–16.

14. The story is repeated in *b. Sanh.* 13b–14a. See comparisons and an examination of manuscripts in Marx, *Bound Phrases*. Briefly stated, there are no significant differences and none that meaningfully alter the story.
15. See additional discussion on the meaning of the dialogue in Marx, *Bound Phrases*, 240–41.
16. I compare here a story of a Babylonian origin and a story originating in the Land of Israel. This has two clear disadvantages. First, it violates Jonah Frankel's principle that the Aggadah is a closed text (Jonah Frankel, "Hermeneutic Questions in the Study of Aggadah," *Tarbiz* 47 [1978]: 139–72). This principle has attracted much opposition in recent years. See the literary review in Chaim Natan Marx, "How Biblical Verses Became an Enchantment against the Evil Eye (Gen 48:16; 49:22 in *Berakhot* 20a and *Ibid.*, 55b)," in *Studies on Magic and Divination in the Biblical World* (ed. G. Philippe, et al.; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013), 211–25. It is also problematic in terms of the material I put side by side. Comparing texts from the Land of Israel with Babylonian texts is unusual in scholarship. See an extensive discussion of the topic and how the two types can be compared in Marx, *Bound Phrases*, 307–15, 325–26.
17. The story of calculating the leap year in Biq'at Rimon can be understood as a part of the struggle between the sages in the Land of Israel and those outside it with the question of what is the religious center. See *b. Ber.* 63a; *y. Ned.* 40a. In this context, calculating the leap year in Biq'at Rimon symbolizes the moment in which the sages in the Land of Israel took authority back. See Aharon Oppenheimer, *Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2007), 118–21. See also Moshe David Herr, *The History of Eretz Israel: The Roman Byzantine Period, The Mishnah and Talmud Period and the Byzantine Rule (70–640)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzchak Ben Zvi and Keter Press, 1985), 87–88.
18. It can be argued that the Oral Torah, which developed from a Torah that could not be written and had no body or shape until being written and having form, is like the simile, which began as an abstract utterance and later gained physical manifestation.