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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

VALUING DISSENT IN A TIME OF CELEBRATION

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

When Rabbi Akiva declared Bar Kochba to be the King Messiah, only one rabbi stood up to him. "Weeds will grow in your jawbones, Akiva, and still the Son of David will not have come", said Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata. (Yerushalmi Taanit 4:5) His line was likely an ironic inversion of Yeshayahu 66:14, "and your bones will flourish like grass".

But who was Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata (lit: "son of a cow")? Let me tell you a story.

Once there was a pious Jew who owned a cow. They worked hard together during the week, and they each rested on Shabbat. Eventually the Jew lost his money and was forced to sell the cow to a Gentile. The cow worked hard for the Gentile during the first week, but when Shabbat came she sat down and simply refused to move, no matter how much the Gentile yelled at her or how hard the Gentile prodded her.

The Gentile came to the Jew and tried to cancel the transaction on the ground that the cow was defective. The Jew, however, understood the problem. He went up to the cow and whispered: "Dear cow, when you were in my possession we both ploughed during the week and rested on Shabbat; now because of my sins you are in the possession of a Gentile, and I ask that you stand up and plough!" The cow obeyed, but the Gentile suspected witchcraft. When the Jew explained what he had said, the Gentile reasoned to himself: If a cow has that much awareness of its Creator, am I not more obligated to do so! Immediately he converted to Judaism. (Pesikta Rabbati 14)

That convert was Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata.

There are many halakhic difficulties with this story. A cow being obstinate once a week is not grounds for reversing a transaction, and a Jew is not allowed to tell an animal to work on Shabbat. But aggadic narratives

often rely on our willful suspension of halakhic disbelief.

Other rabbinic narratives celebrate the spiritual intuition of animals, such as the donkey of R. Pinchas ben Yair, which would refuse to eat untithed grains. Or learn human obligations via a kal vachomer from animals, such as the frogs who self-martyred by jumping into Egyptian stoves. Or have cows be religiously persuadable, as when Eliayhu haNavi convinces the sacrifice of the priests of Baal to accept its fate on Mount Carmel. So there is nothing unusual about this story.

But why (other than his name), is it told about Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata?

I can find only three other possible references to him in Rabbinic literature.

- A. Once, when Rabbi Akiva called him to the Torah, he refused the aliyah on the ground that he had not adequately prepared, and the Sages praised him. (Shemot Rabbah Ki Tisa 40:1)
- B. He stated that the lips of Torah greats move in the grave when their words are cited. (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 7)
- C. He stated that Shiloh was destroyed because sacred things were treated disrespectfully; Yerushalayim in its first form because of idolatry, sexual sins, and bloodshed: but that regarding the most recent destruction, we must acknowledge that the people were energetic in Torah study and punctilious tithers. Why were they nonetheless exiled? Because they loved money, and hated each other. (Tosefta Menachot 13:22)

It is tempting to connect each of these statements to a fundamental dispute with Rabbi Akiva about the Bar Kochba revolt:

- A. One must not be hasty to apply the words of Torah; perhaps one has misunderstood them, and Bar Kochba did not fulfill the Messianic predictions.
- B. Eternal life is more important than this-worldly freedom.
- C. So long as these social ills persist, it is foolhardy to seek to reverse the destruction – and our people have not stopped loving money or hating each other

The first two connections are highly speculative, but I think the third has legs. It certainly fits well with the tradition that Rabbi Akiva's students died because they failed to treat one another respectfully.

Why was Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata the one rabbi capable of articulating this critique?

The story of the Shabbat-sensitive cow tells us that Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata converted not out of love of the Jewish people, but rather out of pure religious conviction. This is a situation that comes up regularly for conversion courts, and there are two ways to formulate the issue. One is pragmatic: Will a convert be able to sustain their commitment if they aren't deeply connected to a community, or if they are regularly disappointed by a community? The second is fundamental: Is concrete *ahavat Yisroel*, love of the Jewish people as we are, with all our individual warts and collective flaws, an essential component of *kabbalat hamitzvot*? The story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata suggests that at least under certain circumstances we can make allowances for converts who are more connected to G-d than to people.

Moreover, there is something very striking about a convert who articulates positions that no one else is willing to say publicly. It takes courage to convert a person with courage, as one will likely be assigned some of the blame when they later take unpopular positions.

More sharply: Imagine that the Bar Kochba Revolt is beginning, and the rabbinic community is lining up

behind him. The universally acknowledged *gadol hador*, the great scholar-leader of the generation, clearly believes the times to be Messianic. At this point a conversion candidate states during his interview that while he of course believes in the Messiah, it seems wholly implausible to him that the Messiah is anywhere nigh, and that the *gadol hador* – indeed the whole rabbinic establishment – has in his humble opinion succumbed to irrational exuberance. Would such a convert make it through the process?

One of the great beauties of Rabbinic tradition is its willingness to preserve even the sharpest of self-critiques, without allowing the possibility of error to lead to paralysis. I wonder if there were rabbis who specifically recognized the need for importing such a critique in a time of mass enthusiasm, and who welcomed Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata specifically because of his stance rather than despite it. I like to think that they did so even while disagreeing with him.

We should not need converts to fill the role of social critics; it is a terribly unfair burden to place on them. Happily our community today is sufficiently diverse that I don't believe it is a necessary burden.

Moreover, it seems that the rabbinic community learned the wrong lesson from Bar Kochba's failure, or at the least, that our political judgment is terrible. Bar Kochba failed despite rabbinic support, and Zionism succeeded despite rabbinic opposition. As a result, it is only in narrow sectors of Orthodoxy that messianic populism causes us to overlook ongoing social ills. Yet we cannot disclaim responsibility for those sectors.

Perhaps a subtle message of the Omer mourning is that Bar Kochba might have succeeded if he had paid more attention to Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata. At the very least, Orthodox Zionists, even as we properly and joyously celebrate the existence, success, and many incredible achievements of the State of Israel, need to ensure that we maintain a space and an open ear for the Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata's among us.