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WHAT IF THE RABBIS BACK THE WRONG MESSIAH?

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By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

When Rabbi Akiva declared Bar Kochba to be the King Messiah, only one rabbi stood up against 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 response was an ironic inversion of the messianic prophecy in 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 (Pesikta Rabbati 14):

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.

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 the story fits easily into the Rabbinic corpus.

But why (other than his name), is it told about Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata? I can find three other possible references to him in Rabbinic literature.

1. 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)
2. He stated that the lips of Torah greats move in the grave when their words are cited. (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 7)
3. He stated that Shiloh was destroyed because sacred things were treated disrespectfully; Yerushalayim of the First Temple was destroyed 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:

1. One must not be hasty to apply the words of Torah; perhaps one has misunderstood them. Rabbi Akiva was too hasty in applying Messianic predictions to Bar Kochba.
2. Eternal life is more important than this-worldly freedom. Let us be Torah greats whose lips move in the grave rather than physical or political heroes whose greatness dies with them.
3. So long as great 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 that at least 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.

But why was Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata the lone rabbi capable of articulating this critique?

The story of the Shabbat-sensitive cow presents Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata as converting out of pure religious conviction rather than out of love for the Jewish people or a particular Jew. Batei Din for conversion often relate to such conversion candidates nervously, for two reasons. One reason is pragmatic: Will a convert who isn't deeply connected to a community be able to sustain their commitment, let alone if they are regularly disappointed by their Jewish communities? The second is fundamental: Is concrete *ahavat Yisrael*, love of the Jewish people as we are, with all our individual warts and collective flaws, an essential component of *kabbalat hamitzvot*?

Moreover, 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, and has named the person (or state) that will usher in Redemption. During this period of fervor, a conversion candidate states to his or her beit din that while they of course believe in the Messiah, as required by Rambam, it seems obvious that the Messiah isn't anywhere nigh, and that the *gadol hador* and rabbinic establishment have 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 the sharpest of self-critiques without yielding to indecision or paralysis. Perhaps some rabbis recognized the need for importing such a critique at a time when the community was in the throes of a mass enthusiasm. They welcomed Rabbi Yochanan ben Torata specifically because of his skeptical stance about imminent messianism 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; that is a terribly unfair burden to place on them. But the most necessary critiques will often regardless come from the awkward and marginalized, the people who are not good at prioritizing social success. Bar Kochba might have succeeded

if Rabbi Akiva's students had understood that no Messianic movement can succeed when its members fail to treat each other, and all others, as *tzalmei Elokim*.

Messianic populism easily leads to ignoring or denying social ills. Orthodox Zionists, while joyously celebrating the existence, success, and many incredible achievements of the State of Israel, must ensure that we maintain a space and an open ear for the Rabbi Yochanan ben Toratas among us.

Shabbat shalom!

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