

Binyamin Lau

THE SAGES

CHARACTER, CONTEXT & CREATIVITY

VOLUME III: THE GALILEAN PERIOD

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Part One

From Yavneh to Usha

Chapter One

The Establishment of the Beit Midrash in Usha

Rabbi Yohanan the Sandal-Maker said: Every assembly that is for the sake of heaven will endure. Any assembly that is not for the sake of heaven will not endure. (Mishna Avot 4:11)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the wake of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the province of Judea became “Syria Palaestina,” also known as Palestine.¹ The Jews were barred from settling in Jerusalem, which became “Aelia Capitolina,” and a temple to Jupiter was built on the Temple Mount. The Jews found themselves economically and spiritually depressed. Jewish lands were expropriated, and heavy taxes were levied on the Jewish population. The Romans tried to sever any connection between the Jews and the Land of Israel.

1. S. Safrai, *In the Time of the Temple and in the Time of the Mishna* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5754), vol. 1, 287–93. According to Safrai, Judea was a territory annexed to Syria and beholden to its procurator in Antioch even after the rebellion. He disagrees with those scholars who maintain that the Romans upgraded Judea and accorded it independent status. See, for instance, G. Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*, trans. Gershon Levi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

For the first time since the return to Zion at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the Jewish population dwindled and the Jewish presence in Judea disappeared. Those who had not fallen in battle were taken captive or sold into slavery. Others sought escape from Roman rule and moved to Babylonia, leaving Judea desolate.²

In 138 CE Emperor Hadrian died and was succeeded by Antoninus Pius, who ruled until 161, during the height of the Pax Romana. Antoninus Pius never left Italy. He relied on the local rulers to administer their provinces and encouraged leaders from all parts of the empire to appeal to him directly.³ A unit from the Sixth Legion, which had been stationed beside Megiddo, was transferred to Mauritius, a sign of relative peace in Judea.⁴ Historical sources attest to the revocation of Hadrian's decree forbidding circumcision, and presumably other such decrees were also revoked during Antoninus' rule.⁵

THE ORDINATION OF SAGES DURING THE PERSECUTION

At the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Jews began to fear that the chain of transmission of Jewish tradition would be forever broken. For hundreds of years the Torah had been passed down from one generation to another, but the persecution threatened to condemn the tradition to oblivion. The Talmud describes a dramatic moment in which Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba managed to safeguard the institution of rabbinic ordination:

2. A. Oppenheimer and M. D. Herr, "A Political and Administrative History from the End of the Bar Kokhba Revolt Until the Division of the Empire" [Hebrew], in *A History of the Land of Israel*, ed. M. D. Herr, vol. 5 (Jerusalem, 5745), 13–23.
3. M. Amit, *A History of the Roman Empire* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5763), 500.
4. M. Avi-Yona, *In the Days of Rome and Byzantium* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5722), 48.
5. See M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1974–84), 622. Stern quotes a Roman legal document from the period which describes the revocation of the decree forbidding circumcision along with the imposition of a punishment on Jews who circumcised members of other faiths. Stern assumes that this is just one example of the revocation of all of Hadrian's decrees against the Jews. On the efforts to limit conversion to Judaism during this period, see L. H. Feldman, "Conversion and Syncretism" [Hebrew], in *A History of the Jews*, ed. M. Stern, vol. 1, *The Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic Roman World* (Tel Aviv, 5743), 205–7.

The evil empire once enacted the following oppressive decrees against the Jewish people: Anyone who confers rabbinic ordination will be killed, and anyone who accepts ordination will be killed, and any town in which ordination is conferred will be destroyed, and the boundaries of a town within which ordination is conferred will be eradicated. What did Yehuda ben Baba do? He went and sat between two large mountains, and between two large cities, and between their Sabbath limit boundaries, between Usha and Shefaram, and he ordained five elders there. And they were: Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. Rav Avya added that Rabbi Neḥemia was ordained there as well. When their enemies discovered them, Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba said to his students: My sons, run! The students said to him: Our teacher, what will become of you? He said to them: I am placed before my enemies like a rock that cannot be overturned. It was said: The soldiers did not leave the spot where they had found Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba until they had driven three hundred iron spears through him and made him into a sieve. (Sanhedrin 14a)

This story is primarily concerned not with the death of Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba, but with the preservation of the line of halakhic transmission.⁶ The Talmud's term for ordination is *semikha*, which refers to the act of appointing a sage to a particular position⁷ and authorizing him to adjudicate cases involving penalties.⁸ Teachers need a way of entrusting their responsibility and knowledge to qualified students to enable the seamless continuity of the halakhic system. Without some

6. Rabbinic literature contains another account of Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba's death at the hands of the Romans. For more on this figure, see *Sages* 11, Part Five, where I also discuss the story of his death as one of the ten martyrs.
7. See Y. Sanhedrin 1:2 (19a); H. Albeck, "Ordination and Appointment and the Court," *Tziyon* 8 (5703): 85–93.
8. This is clear from Rav Ashi's statement: "We ordain him in His name, we call him Rabbi, and we authorize him to judge cases involving penalties" (Y. Sanhedrin 1:2 [19a]). See S. Albeck, *The Courts in the Talmudic Period* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan, 5741), 84–99.

form of ordination, there is no means of authorizing a new generation to teach and judge the public. Any rupture in the line of transmission endangers the entire Jewish future. Thus, Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba's willingness to sacrifice his own life for the sake of ensuring that a new generation of rabbis would be ordained was exceedingly consequential. He linked the generations one to another and enabled the next cohort of sages to renew the creative life of Torah even after their teachers were no longer with them.⁹

A parallel tradition relates that it was Rabbi Akiva who ordained these sages:

Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gevat until Antiparis, and they all died during one period, because they did not treat each other with respect. And the world was barren [of Torah], until Rabbi Akiva came to our rabbis in the south and taught them Torah. [They were] Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, and it was these disciples who upheld Torah at that time. (Yevamot 62b)¹⁰

If we wish to harmonize these two traditions, we might say that Rabbi Akiva managed to pass on his teachings to these five disciples during the early days of the Bar Kokhba revolt, and after his death Rabbi

9. This story appears to be an aggadic tradition rather than a historical fact. After all, the Talmud also relates that Rabbi Akiva was the one who ordained Rabbi Meir. The setting of the story also seems unlikely. During the period of persecution these sages were active in Yavneh, not in the Galilee. Rabbi R. Margalio suggests that the phrase "between Usha and Shefaram" refers to a historical period, that is, from the time the Sanhedrin was at Usha until it was in Shefaram, though this seems unconvincing. (See Margalio, *Pearls of the Sea* [Hebrew], Sanhedrin 14a, sec. 3). S. Safrai asserts that this incident is related in rich, figurative language and has no historical grounding. See his *Time of the Temple and Time of the Mishna*, vol. 2, 604. Also see A. Oppenheimer, "Gedalia Alon Fifty Years On" [Hebrew], *Tziyon* 69 (5764), 473–74.
10. A parallel source in *Genesis Rabba* 61 relates that Rabbi Akiva ordained seven disciples, including Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker and Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov. See H. Licht, "On the Deaths of the Students of Rabbi Akiva," [Hebrew] in *Tura: A Collection of Articles in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. M. Ilai, presented to Professor Shlomo (Simon) Greenburg (Tel Aviv, 5749), 119–34.

Yehuda ben Baba ordained them. However, the Talmud elsewhere relates that Rabbi Akiva did not just teach Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Meir, but also ordained them (Y. Sanhedrin 1:2 [19a]). So perhaps this ordination took place before the nation had accepted them as sages, and therefore they officially needed to be ordained again.¹¹ When Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba reordained them they were accepted, either because they had matured or because changed circumstances necessitated it.¹² We can conclude that all of these sources, even if they appear inconsistent with one another, attempt to link the sages of Yavneh to their successors in the Galilee.

THE SECRET ASSEMBLY IN THE RIMON VALLEY

The Jerusalem Talmud describes the first rabbinic assembly after the persecution:

An incident is related of seven elders who came together to intercalate the year in the Valley of Rimon. Who were they? Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Nehemia, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, and Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker. They said: How many gradations of rulings apply to holy things and heave offerings? Rabbi Meir said: Thirteen. Rabbi Yose said: Twelve. Rabbi Meir said: I heard thirteen from Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker said: I served Rabbi Akiva standing up, whereas you served him sitting down. They said: Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker is really an Alexandrian. (Y. Ḥagiga 3:1 [78d])

11. *The Letter of Rav Sherira Gaon* cites a Babylonian tradition from Sanhedrin 14a according to which Rabbi Meir was ordained by Rabbi Akiva, but the people rejected him because he was too young. Also see *Dikdukei Sofrim* and Rashi's commentary on this passage. These sources suggest that ordination alone is not sufficient; a sage must also be accepted by the community.
12. S. Safrai argues that this source is far-fetched: "Who was Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba that his ordination would be regarded more highly than that of Rabbi Akiva?" See his *Time of the Temple and Time of the Mishna*, vol. 2, 604. The answer is not that Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba was regarded more highly, but rather that the historical circumstances had changed.

The intercalation of the year was a task reserved for the sages and served as a hallmark of their privileged status.¹³ The assembly at Rimón attests to the sages' desire to return to routine and resume their responsibilities as leaders of the nation.

The Location

We cannot identify with certainty the location of this assembly. The Rimón Valley is thought to be located in the Lower Galilee, south of Beit Netofa, in Wadi Rimona, five kilometers northeast of Tzipori, the capital city of the Galilee.¹⁴ But this identification is contradicted by the statement that "The year is intercalated only in Judea" (Sanhedrin 11b), which the tannaïc sage Ḥanania of Ono affirms: "If it was intercalated in the Galilee, it is ineffective." The Talmud's explanation of Ḥanania's statement is based on a biblical verse: "To His dwelling place you shall seek, and there you shall come" (Deut. 12:5). The Talmud explains, "Any matter you wish to learn should be sought out only in God's dwelling place." According to Shmuel Safrai, "It is very unlikely that the sages permitted themselves to intercalate the year in the Galilee so soon after the revolt. It is more likely that these sages, who were still largely unknown, did not dare to intercalate the year in the Galilee, but instead endangered their lives by gathering in Judea. So we should look for this Rimón Valley near the Rimón in Judea, northeast of Jerusalem and still marked on the Madaba Map."¹⁵

In contrast to Safrai's opinion, Ḥanania of Ono's testimony seems to support the view that the assembly took place in the Galilee, not in

13. Tannaïc literature often asserts that rabbinic ordination was a prerequisite to the sanctification of the new moon and the intercalation of the year. See Mishna Rosh HaShana 2:5–8, 4:1–4; Tosefta Sanhedrin 2:6.

14. S. Klein assumes that this was the location of the assembly based on references to the name Rimón in other sources. See Klein, *The Land of the Galilee* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5727), 74.

15. S. Safrai, "The Locations of the Sanctification of the Moon and the Intercalation of the Year Before the Destruction" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 35 (5726), 29 (also in Safrai, *Time of the Temple, Time of the Mishna*, 250.) Also see Y. Schwartz, "The Land of Israel After the Suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt" [Hebrew], in *The Bar Kokhba Revolt: New Studies*, ed. A. Oppenheimer and U. Rappaport (Jerusalem, 5744), 219–20 and note 27.

Judea. Ḥanania lived at the end of Rabbi Akiva's lifetime and in the early days of Usha.¹⁶ In parallel sources in the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud, he claims that if it is impossible to intercalate the year in Judea, it is permitted to do so in the Galilee.¹⁷ His testimony reflects a historical moment in which the sages sought to continue the line of halakhic transmission though there was no longer a Jewish presence in Judea.

The Time

The assembly took place shortly after Hadrian's final decrees and the beginning of Antoninus Pius' reign, presumably at the end of the fourth decade of the second century of the common era. A group of sages gathered in total secrecy to renew the institutions of leadership. Notably absent was Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who would become the next patriarch. Some of the participants had been ordained by Rabbi Akiva, including Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Shimon. Also present was Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker, Rabbi Akiva's right-hand man and the elder within this group.

The Atmosphere

The first discussion at the assembly was related to the laws of the Temple and the food eaten by the priests: "How many gradations of rulings apply to holy things and heave offerings?" The term "holy things" (*kodesh*) refers to meat that was designated for a sacrifice, portions of which were permitted to be eaten. The heave offering (*teruma*) is a share of the grain, vegetable, or fruit harvest that is given as a tithe to the priests. The question of "gradations of rulings" appears in the Mishna (Ḥagiga 3:4), where it is established that "There is an additional stringency in holy things as compared to heave offerings." The Talmud explains that the sages were more stringent with holy things than with heave offerings, because the meat of holy things could be eaten by anyone who brought a sacrifice,

16. We can date Ḥanania based on the few references to him in rabbinic literature. He cites a halakhic ruling that he received during the period of Rabbi Akiva's imprisonment (Gittin 66b, according to Rashi).

17. Tosefta Sanhedrin 2:13; Y. Nedarim 6:8 (40a).

whereas heave offerings were eaten exclusively by the priests, the sole experts in observing the elaborate rules of purity.

It seems strange that the sages who gathered to intercalate the year are preoccupied with the intricate question of gradations of rulings. One commentator explains that the sages' debate signals a desire to "elevate Jerusalem to the height of their joy."¹⁸ But the numbers twelve and thirteen, which are offered as responses in the discussion, suggest a different understanding. These numbers, other experts explain, were part of the calculations concerning whether that year should contain twelve or thirteen months. The sages were trying to conceal the real issue at hand by using terms from the world of Temple worship – holy things and heave offerings – in order to prevent anyone eavesdropping on their discussion from reporting to the authorities about the true purpose of their assembly.¹⁹

Rabbi Akiva's spirit presides over this assembly, even though he is not physically present. The discussion is led by Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yose, who try to anchor their views in their teacher's traditions. Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker intercedes and tries to put the young Rabbi Meir in his place: "I served Rabbi Akiva standing up, whereas you served him sitting down." He intends to prove that he spent more time in Rabbi Akiva's beit midrash and can therefore more reliably repeat his teachings. The other members of the assembly respond that "Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker is really an Alexandrian." What do they mean?

Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker did not grow up in Yavneh or its environs. He was a foreign transplant from Alexandria. The residents of Israel, including the sages, were not particularly enamored of these new arrivals. They used the term Alexandrian to refer to someone arrogant, coarse, boastful, loud, and impatient.²⁰ It is significant that they applied this derogatory label to Rabbi Yoḥanan even at a time when

18. This is the explanation of Rabbi Moshe Margalit, the Penei Moshe, in his commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud.

19. This opinion was expressed by Rabbi R. Margalioṭ in *Really an Alexandrian: A Book in Memory of Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac HaLevi*, ed. M. Auerbach (Benei Brak, 5724), 214–18.

20. S. Lieberman, "So It Was and So It Will Be: The Jews of the Land of Israel and the Jews of the World During the Period of the Mishna and Talmud," in *The Land of Israel in the Period of the Mishna and the Talmud* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5751), 332.

the population in Israel was sparse and every additional Jewish resident counted. On several other occasions when the Mishna deplores the lack of refinement among the “Babylonians,” the Talmud (that is, the Babylonian Talmud) clarifies the situation: “They were not Babylonians but rather Alexandrians; but since they [the sages] hated the Babylonians, they referred to the Alexandrians this way” (Yoma 66b; Menaḥot 100a). As this source suggests, the sages barely tolerated the Alexandrians, but they truly detested the Babylonians.

Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker was one of Rabbi Akiva’s few surviving original students. We have already seen that he transmitted teachings from the period of Rabbi Akiva’s incarceration at the hands of the Romans.²¹ Another source links him with Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua in the period after the Bar Kokhba revolt:

An incident is told of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua and Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker, who were going to Netzivin to study Torah with Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira. When they got to Sidon, they remembered the Land of Israel and raised their eyes, and the tears flowed. They rent their garments and recited this verse: “and you shall possess it and dwell in it. And you shall take heed to do all the statutes and ordinances” [Deut. 11:31–32]. They said: The duty of dwelling in the Land of Israel is equivalent to all the other commandments in the Torah. Thereupon they returned to the Land of Israel. (Sifrei, Deuteronomy 80)

At the end of the revolt, many residents of the Land of Israel made their way abroad.²² The midrashic tradition in the Sifrei tells of two disciples of Rabbi Akiva who hesitate at the border. They find that they cannot bear to leave the land, so they return to Israel. Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker joins the other surviving disciples of Rabbi Akiva who assembled after the persecution and sought to renew Jewish life, first by intercalating the year, a symbol of the revival of the Sanhedrin.

21. See *Sages II*, Part Four.

22. *Ibid.*, Part Five.

Morsels of Torah

The Jerusalem Talmud continues its account of the assembly in the Rimón Valley:

They arose from their meeting with a kiss. And whoever in the group did not have a cloak, his fellow cut his cloak in half and gave it to him. And why did they do so? Because each of them interpreted the following verse in seven different ways: “Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: my beloved has a vineyard on a very fertile hill” [Is. 5:1]. And they praised the last of them, because he had found a fine interpretation of the verse. They said it was Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai. And why was it so urgent? For they interpreted the verse as follows: “You shall make for yourself no molten gods” [Ex. 34:17]. What is written after that? “The feast of unleavened bread you shall observe” [Ex. 34:18]. They said: Whoever has sufficient grounds to intercalate the year and does not do so is as if he worships idols. (Y. Ḥagiga 3:1 [78d])

The Jerusalem Talmud offers us a glimpse of a ceremony that took place under trying circumstances but with all the requisite attention to detail. Several rules govern the intercalation of the year. It may be done only by the Sanhedrin, and only in the presence of the patriarch. It must be a festive event in which the sages wear their official garments and publicize the intercalation at the end. At this assembly the participants tried to attire themselves appropriately, but they were missing several cloaks. So they divided these garments among one another by cutting them.²³ It all happened with great haste. When they concluded, “they arose from the meeting with a kiss,” on good terms with one another.

The Jerusalem Talmud asks about the urgency of intercalating the year at this point. The answer involves the exegesis of two adjacent but seemingly unrelated verses from Exodus 34. One verse says, “You shall make for yourself no molten gods,” and the next says, “The feast

23. See A. Ehrlich, “Another Chapter in the Creation of Midrash and *Aggadah*” [Hebrew], in *Teuda: A Collection of Studies of the Ḥayyim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies*, ed. Y. Hoffman, 16–17 (5761).

of unleavened bread you shall observe.” The disparate verses are linked exegetically: Anyone who can intercalate the year but does not do so (and therefore fails to observe Passover on time) is regarded as if he worships idols. In the parallel source in the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, a leader of the previous generation at Yavneh, says that anyone who spurns the festivals is regarded as an idol worshipper. Perhaps the sages who gathered in the Rimón Valley were familiar with this interpretation and reworked it to address the issue at hand.

As the Talmud relates, the sages went on to interpret a verse from Isaiah that introduces a parable about a vineyard:

Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved has a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He broke the
ground, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he
built a watchtower inside it, and he even hewed a wine press in it,
for he hoped it would yield grapes; but it yielded only wild grapes.
And now, you dwellers of Jerusalem and men of Judah, you be
the judges between me and my vineyard: What more could have
been done for my vineyard that I failed to do in it? (Is. 5:1–4)

This is a song that starts joyously and ends bitterly, and the sages quote it with broken hearts. Assembled at the end of the period of persecution, they remember the glory days of the vineyard at Yavneh and lament the high hopes of the previous generation, which had dreamt of a Jerusalem of gold. They know they must rebuild the Torah world after the destruction and replant the withered vineyard, for anyone who can intercalate the year and does not do so is regarded as if he worships idols.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai displays his exegetical prowess. He is the last sage to interpret the verse under discussion, and his exegesis elicits praise from his colleagues. According to some commentaries, he was crowned head of the sages, as per the words of the famous song of the kabbalist Rabbi Shimon ben Lavi: “Bar Yoḥai – you were anointed, happy are you.”²⁴ But it seems more likely that his colleagues were

24. H. Kolitz, *Ben HaAliya: Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and His Teachings* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 5746), 42–49.

simply praising him for shedding light on the parable of the vineyard. His words bring the assembly to a close.

The Immortalization of the Assembly

The Jerusalem Talmud goes on to describe the sages' attempt to immortalize their assembly:

When they were ready to leave, they said: Come and let us leave a monument to what we have done. And there was a marble stone, and each of them took a nail and hammered it in, and the nail went into the stone as into a piece of dough, and to this day it is called "the nailed marble." (Y. Ḥagiga 3:1 [78d])

The sages recognized the significance of their assembly. They knew that the responsibility for the future spiritual leadership of the Jewish people rested squarely on their shoulders.

THE ASSEMBLY AT USHA

Though the pernicious imperial decrees had been revoked, the people acclimated to the new reality only gradually. They were allowed to gather to study Torah, to intercalate the year, and to fulfill mitzvot, and slowly they resumed their routine. At this point, the leaders of the generation assembled to gather information and establish religious norms for the new era:

At the end of the great persecution, our teachers met together in Usha, and they were Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Neḥemia, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Yose HaGlili, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov. They sent a message to the elders of the Galilee, saying: Whoever has learned, let him come and teach. And whoever has not learned, let him come and learn. They came together and studied and took all the necessary steps. When the time came to depart, they said: We cannot leave a place where we have been welcomed without imparting a blessing. They gave Rabbi Yehuda the honor of speaking first, because he belonged to the place, not because he was the most

learned among them. For it is a man's place that confers distinction upon him. (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

Selecting the Location

The location of this assembly was not chosen at random. Usha was the home of Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai, whom the Romans regarded as an ally, or at least as a moderate. We will consider him more fully in the pages that follow. Suffice it to say that Usha emerged unscathed from the revolt and the subsequent persecution. It was the first place to which the Sanhedrin relocated after Yavneh, as the Talmud attests:

The Divine Presence journeyed ten journeys... and correspondingly the Sanhedrin was exiled... from Jerusalem to Yavneh, and from Yavneh to Usha. (Rosh HaShana 31a)²⁵

When the fighting subsided and the decrees of persecution were repealed, the surviving leaders gathered in a stable location and proclaimed a return to Torah and rabbinic leadership. Their pronouncement reflects the enormity of their distress: "Whoever has learned, let him come teach." The paucity of qualified sages was a matter of dire concern. There was grave fear that the tradition might be lost, so the sages sought to marshal all the resources of knowledge from the preceding generations. We do not know much about the conference itself, but the midrash relates that at the closing session, permission to speak was transferred from sage to sage. Each sage offered his own words of

25. According to the printed text of the Talmud, the Sanhedrin moved from *Usha* to Yavneh and then returned to Usha. Academic scholars have corrected this version, deleting the duplication of relocations because it makes no sense. They base their emendation on several manuscripts. For another view, see D. Henshke, "From Usha to Yavneh: The Development of a Tradition" [Hebrew], *JSIJ* 1 (2002): 1–9. Henshke argues that we cannot ignore the printed version, because it is supported by textual evidence. He surveys versions of the Talmud, liturgical poems, commentaries, and material evidence, but draws no historical conclusions. There seems to be no evidence of a reawakening of Jewish leadership in Judea after the Usha period, so I concur with the version in which the Sanhedrin moved from Judea to the Galilee and then stayed there.

blessing. Their speeches were full of political overtones reflecting the new reality in which the sages found themselves.

Rabbi Yehuda's Homily

We have a record of the blessings offered by the various sages, beginning with Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai, who was the local rabbinic authority and the host of the assembly. The midrash notes that he was not the greatest sage present, but the fact that they were in his native environs conferred on him the privilege of speaking first:

Rabbi Yehuda came forward and expounded, "Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, some distance from the camp" [Ex. 33:7]. The word "distance" is used here, and elsewhere it says, "Yet there shall be distance between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure" [Josh. 3:4]. Just as the word "distance" in one text means two thousand cubits, this is what it means in the other text. The text goes on to say not "and it came to pass that everyone who sought Moses," but rather "and it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord." From this we learn that receiving scholars is like receiving the Divine Presence. And you, our brothers, our teachers, eminent in knowledge of Torah, if some of you have taken the trouble to come ten miles or twenty or thirty or forty miles to hear the Torah taught, you may rest assured that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will not withhold your reward in this world and the next! (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

This homily speaks directly to the situation in which the sages find themselves. Those who gather at Usha feel as if they are in exile. They are accustomed to gathering at the beit midrash in Yavneh, where Rabbi Akiva and his students were the locals. It is degrading to find themselves exiled to a place that had no role in the revolt against Rome. Rabbi Yehuda, sensitive to their frame of mind, begins his homily with a reference to Moses' retreat from the camp in order to hear the voice of God in the Tent of Meeting. He appeals to his guests' sense of displacement by referring to the need to exile oneself in order to receive

the Divine Presence. He humbly tells his guests that they have come to Usha not to be near him, but to be near Torah. Usha was a place where Torah survived the persecution, which is why the sages have gathered there. Rabbi Yehuda is aware of the pain accompanying their arrival at this place, and he thanks the sages for subjecting themselves to exile so as to make their way to his place of Torah.

Rabbi Neḥemia's Homily

Rabbi Neḥemia came forward and expounded, “An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord” [Deut. 24:4]. It has been taught: Two great peoples were excluded from entering the assembly of the Lord. Why? “Because they did not meet you with bread and water” [Deut. 24:5]. Now did Israel require them at that time? All forty years that [the people of] Israel were in the wilderness, did the well not come up for them and the manna descend for them, and were quails not always provided for them, and did the clouds of glory not surround them, and did the pillar of cloud not journey before them? And yet you say, “Because they did not meet them with bread and water”? Rabbi Elazar said: Basic courtesy requires that one who has come from a journey be met with bread and water. See now how God punished these two peoples. It is written in the Torah, “An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord.” But as for you, men of Usha, who have put your food, your drink, and your couches at the service of our teachers, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will requite you with a good reward. (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

Rabbi Neḥemia, the first of the guests to speak, responds to their host. We know very little about this figure. The Jerusalem Talmud (Ta’anit 4:2 [68a]) relates that a genealogical scroll found in Jerusalem lists Rabbi Neḥemia as a descendant of the biblical Neḥemia, who moved to the Land of Israel to serve as a local governor in Judea in the fifth century BCE. In any case, Rabbi Neḥemia refers to that period in Israel’s history in which the people wandered through the desert without need

for bread or water, because they were provided for by the manna, the well, and the clouds of God's glory. He seems to be suggesting that had the sages truly merited, they would not have needed to rely on the good graces of the people of Usha. Rabbi Neḥemia pays his respects to his hosts, but only halfheartedly. For him Usha is merely a way station. He longs to return to the days of the manna, the well, and the clouds of glory.

Rabbi Meir's Homily

Rabbi Meir then came forward and expounded, "There was an old prophet living in Bethel" [I Kings 13:11]. Who was he? He was Amaziah the priest of Bethel. (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

Rabbi Meir seeks to conjoin two historical personalities. He identifies the old prophet from the days of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who dwelled in Bethel while prophesying the city's destruction, with the figure of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel who sought to extradite the prophet Amos to Jeroboam II because of his prophecies about the destruction of Israel (Amos 7). Over two hundred years separate the two figures whom Rabbi Meir conflates.

No sooner has Rabbi Meir opened his mouth than Rabbi Yose cries out from the audience, insisting that Rabbi Meir clarify the message he seeks to deliver:

Meir, there are broken eggs here [i.e., you have confused matters]. Who was he? He was Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses, as it says, "Jonathan son of Gershom son of Manasseh" [Judges 18:30]. The letter *nun* in Manasseh is suspended, as if to indicate that if he were virtuous, he would be regarded as the son of Moses [Moshe in Hebrew, which is spelled like Menashe (Manasseh) but without the *nun*], and if not, as the son of Manasseh. (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

According to Rabbi Yose, the old prophet quoted in I Kings is not Amaziah but rather Jonathan son of Gershom son of Manasseh from the

Book of Judges. But this identification, too, contains a historical fallacy, since this figure lived two hundred years earlier.

Rabbi Meir continues his homily despite Rabbi Yose's interruption. He explains that the element common to both stories is the eating of "deceitful bread."²⁶ Rabbi Meir comments:

Does it not then stand to reason? If this man, who deceived the other and gave him deceitful bread to eat, was nonetheless privileged to have the holy spirit rest upon him, how much more do you, our brothers, men of Usha, who have received our teachers with your food and drink and lodging, deserve to be requited by the Holy One, Blessed Be He, with a good reward! (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

Rabbi Meir's words reflect his sense of personal affront at having to eat "deceitful bread." As a leading disciple of Rabbi Akiva, he is a man of Yavneh, yet he is forced to come to Usha to take succor from the residents of the Galilee. His blessing is bittersweet.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's Homily

All of these homilies bespeak the sense of exile experienced by Rabbi Akiva's disciples when they visit Usha. But Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, the last to speak, voices a very different sentiment. He focuses on his sense that "this day you have become a people." He claims that the vantage point of the sages enables them to look to the future:

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov then came forward and expounded: "And Moses and the priests and the Levites spoke unto all of Israel, saying: Keep silent, and hear, O Israel – this day you have become a people" [Deut. 27:9]. Was it on that day that they received the Torah? Hadn't they already received the Torah forty years earlier? How, then, can you say, "This day"? It teaches you that since

26. For more on the conflation of the old prophet with the priest at Bethel, and on the notion of "deceitful bread," see N. Samet, "Between 'Eat Bread There' and 'Don't Eat Bread There'" [Hebrew], *Masekhet 2* (5764): 167–81.

Moses had repeated the Torah to them and they had received it gladly, it was considered as if they had received it that very day from Mount Sinai. Therefore, it is said, “this day you have become a people to the Lord your God.” To you, then, our brothers, men of Usha, who have received our teachers so gladly, how much more does this apply! (Song of Songs Rabba 2:3)

Rabbi Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker, who participated in the assembly in the Rimon Valley, is not mentioned among the sages at the conference at Usha, suggesting that he passed away between the two events. Alternatively, his statement in *Pirkei Avot* (4:11), “Any assembly for the sake of heaven is destined to endure,” may refer to this assembly at Usha, whose sole purpose was to restore Torah to its proper place and continue Jewish life in the Land of Israel. It is also worth noting the absence of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who would soon come to Usha to restore the patriarchy. Apparently he had not yet arrived.

This official gathering ushers us into a new era in which the Galilee becomes the center of Jewish leadership. With the external political front finally calm, the sages can turn their attention inward. We will take advantage of this calm equilibrium to listen closely to the voices that came forth from the beit midrash.