



*A Historical Background
of Churban Beitar*

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סיון תשע"ט

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Every year on Tisha B'av we commemorate five tragedies that befell our people on that day. One of them is the destruction of the city of Beitar, which took place just over fifty years after the destruction of Yerushalayim and the Bais Hamikdash. Rambam tells it to us this way: that on Tisha B'av, "The great city of Beitar was conquered, which had in it thousands and ten of thousands of Yisroel. They had a great king and all Yisroel and (even) the great chachomim imagined that he would be the *Melech Hamoshiach*. He fell into the hands of the gentiles and all of them were killed. It was a *tzara* as great as the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash."

The interim years between these two events, *churban* Yerushalayim and the war of Beitar, were terrible ones for our people. Rome and its despotic emperors never stopped their oppression of our people. When Jews arose in many places to defend themselves, the response was so brutal that many Jewish communities were totally eradicated, with tens of thousand who perished. As *Chazal* tell us, "It is a *halacha* that Esav hates Yaakov." This hatred reached its peak when our people suffered the misfortune of being under the rule of Esav, (Rome).

Unrealized hopes

The Roman emperor Hadrian started his reign by trying to appease the nations under his rule. He hoped to avoid rebellions by granting them some privileges and benefits that would keep them content. For the Jews, he gave permission to rebuild the destroyed city of Jerusalem and to erect a new Bais Hamikdash to replace the one that his predecessors had destroyed.

The spirit of the nation was revived. They compared this to the building of the second Bais Hamikdash, which had also been done under the foreign rule of Persia. That Bais Hamikdash, which had been built with the encouragement of the prophets, had all the *halachic* requirements necessary for bringing *korbanos*, and was a full fledged Bais Hamikdash in every sense of the word. True, it lacked five elements that had been present in the first Bais Hamikdash: there was no Divine presence (*Shechina*) there, no *Urim V'tumim*, no fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices, no *Aron Kodesh*, and no *Kohen Gadol* possessing *Ruach Hakodesh*. Nevertheless, it could still qualify as a bonafide Bais Hamikdash, and all the *halachos* of such a *makom kadosh* applied. That is what they hoped to replicate now under the rule of Rome.

Our people were ecstatic over this promise. The fervour and excitement spread throughout the entire Jewish world. Monies were collected to fund the massive

project, and Yidden were coming from as far away as Bavel to help in the building. Two very righteous brothers, Papus and Lulianus, set up centers with all necessary supplies, from Ako in Eretz Yisroel until Antuchia in Syria, to equip the volunteers with whatever they needed. All this was done with the full royal permission of Rome, but as we shall see, it was not yet the time for the Bais Hamikdash to be rebuilt.

Don't hurry the final redemption

Chazal tell us, based on a verse in *Shir Hashirim*, that Hashem brought *Klal Yisroel* into an oath that they would not push for a premature redemption. The generation of *Bar Kochba* was doing just that. They were hoping that *Bar Kochba* would be the *Moshiach* and bring the final redemption, but the time was not ripe, there was no Heavenly indication that it would be so, and therefore it led to disaster.

Slandered by our enemies

As has happened so many times in our history, whenever the government wanted to grant some privilege to Am Yisroel, our enemies slandered us to the government. They warned the emperor that if the Jews were to rebuild Jerusalem and the Bais Hamikdash, they would surely assert their independence and refrain from paying taxes. The emperor did not want to make a fool out of himself by retracting a promise which he had given, so they told him that he can halt the project without renegeing on his word. All that is needed is to command them to move the Bais Hamikdash slightly from its original site, or add on to it a little bit. Since this would not be permissible for them to do, it would in effect make it impossible to rebuild. That is precisely what the emperor did.

Just at this time, the emperor's daughter was found murdered. Of course, the Romans accused the Jews of doing it, and were about to make terrible decrees against them. Then the two *tzadikim*, Papus and Lulianus, arose and (falsely) admitted that they had perpetrated the murder, just to save the rest of the people from punishment. The king had only them executed. The executor (*Trinus*) asked them, "If you are from the same people as *Chananya*, *Mishael* and *Azarya*, let your G-d come and save you from me just as he saved them from *Nevuchadnetzar*." They responded, "*Chananya*, *Mishael* and *Azarya* were complete *tzadikim* and *Nevuchadnetzar* was a distinguished king and were worthy of having a miracle performed for them. We, however, have sinned and owe our lives to G-d. If you

don't kill us, Hashem has many other murderers, bears and lions, in His world who can kill us. Hashem has only allowed us to be given into your hand so that He will punish you for our blood, that you are about to spill. When we die *al kiddush Hashem*, then you will know that we are indeed among the people of *Chananya*, *Mishael* and *Azarya*." These two brothers are known as "the murdered in *Lod*, and *Chazal* say that their place in Gan Eden is so high that no one else can even stand together with them." As soon as *Trinus* killed them, two officers came from Rome and killed him (for political reasons).

Rabbi Yehoshua saves the day

When the people became aware of Rome's treachery, they cried hysterically. The terrible announcement came while volunteers were still on their way from far and near to help in the construction, and while all the necessary preparations were in progress. Now there arose a wave of anger and defiant spirit that made them want to go ahead with the rebuilding of the *Bais Hamikdash*, even without the emperor's permission. This would have proved catastrophic, for had they done so, it would have constituted an open rebellion against Rome, which would have brought on them all the fury and brutality of which Rome was so capable. The *chachomim* knew that this would have been a fatal error, so they sought someone who could appease the people and put the matter to rest. Their choice was *Rabbi Yehoshua*.

Rabbi Yehoshua calmed them with a parable. The lion had devoured his prey, but a bone was stuck in his throat. He said that whoever would be able to take the bone out would receive a reward. Along came a bird with a very long neck. He stuck his head inside the lion's mouth, extricated the bone, and asked for his reward. The lion told him "Go around and praise yourself that you entered the lion's mouth and came out unharmed." Rabbi Yehoshua explained, "Thus it is with us. We have entered into involvement with this nation in peace and have exited in peace, alive and well." The people accepted his appeasement and the rebellion did not take place.

Renewed persecutions

When Rome conquered other nations, those people soon adapted and blended into the Roman culture. They were even proud when finally granted the honor of being considered a Roman province. The Jewish people, however, unlike all the rest, never blended in with the Romans. No matter how dispersed they were throughout the empire, they had their own communities and continued to live their own unique

life style, avoiding the defilement of the nations as much as possible. They refused to intermarry with the gentiles, did not eat from their food or drink their wine. They continued learning Torah and giving their allegiance to the *Sanhedrin*. In less than a *Yovel* of years from the time of the *churban*, the nation had multiplied and revived itself, to the point that Rome worried about their power and their independent spirit.

Now Rome changed its attitude completely, and began viewing the Jewish people once again as a potential threat. In order to crush the spirit of the people, the emperor decreed, among other cruelties, that a new and vibrant city be built on the ruins of old *Yerushalayim*. It would be name *Aelia Capitolina*, because his name was *Aelis*. His vengeance went even further than that, when he decreed that a central pagan temple be built on the site of the former *Bais Hamikdash*. Inside *Yerushalyim* itself he had two temples built, one to Jupiter and one to Venus. On the very site of the *Kodesh Hakadashim* he put a likeness of himself.

Hadrian went even further to decree that any Jew who will come up to *Eretz Yisroel* from outside would be killed. On the gateway of *Bais Lechem* he put the likeness of a pig. He decreed that no Jew should enter the city of *Yerushalayim*. Worst of all, he outlawed any Jew who would maintain one of the three signs Hashem gave us. We have three mitzvos which the Torah refers to as a sign (*Os*): *Shabbos*, *bris milah* and *tefilin*. At this time Hadrian gave the order that no Jew may keep the *Shabbos* or give his son a *bris*. He forbade the fulfillment of *Taharas Hamishpachai* and *krias sh'ma*. *Rabbi Meir* reported that he was once sitting with the *talmidim* in front of *Rabbi Akiva*, but they had to recite the *Sh'ma* silently, because an officer was standing by the door to stop them from saying it.

Our people understood that what Rome wanted was to do away with the Jewish people, their beliefs, their Torah, and crush them altogether. The *Gemora* tells us what the final straw was that brought about the rebellion against Rome. It was the custom that when a boy was born they planted a cedar tree and when a girl was born they planted a pine tree. When they grew up to be matched, and married, they would cut down the trees to make a *chupah* from them. One time the emperor's daughter was passing through and needed wood to repair her regal wagon. Her servants cut down two of these trees, and the Jews attacked them for it. The emperor was told that the Jews are rebelling, and sent his armies to put down the rebellion.

Now the anger that had been seething under the surface finally burst forth, as if a fire had been ignited that spread throughout the people. Almost spontaneously the

Jewish people organized themselves for battle. At first they did not come out openly against Rome, but rather they dug caves and found other hiding places from which they could conduct guerrilla warfare against the Roman troops. The Romans were not intimidated and were confident that they could put a stop to the rebellion.

At this point, there came on the scene *Shimon bar Kuziba*, (known to us by the nickname *Bar Kochba*). Tremendously strong and respected by the people, he began to gather soldiers from all four corners of our land. The Jews of that time were brave, strong and fearless. In order to accept them into his army, *Bar Kochba* made them do something rather gruesome to demonstrate their fearlessness. They were told to bite off a finger with their teeth. The *chachomim* sent him a message that he is turning Bnai Yisroel into *ba'alei mumin* (blemished). He asked them how else can he know for sure of their strength and bravery. They told him that each candidate should uproot a cedar tree from the *Levanon* forest while riding on a horse. He followed their advice, and had two hundred thousand that had bitten off the finger and two hundred thousand that had uprooted the cedar tree.

Bar Kochba's soldiers fearlessly attacked the Romans, and did to them what no other nation had ever done before. They retook nine hundred and eighty five cities and villages from the Romans, reconquered *Yerushalayim* and chased the Romans out of the entire *Eretz Yisroel*. His initial successes were nothing short of supernatural. *Bar Kochba* set up an independent kingdom, with himself as the *nasi*. He minted coins, which are still in existence to this day. At this time, *Rabbi Akiva* was fully behind *Bar Kochba*, and actually believed that he would be the long-hoped-for *Moshiach*. The *chachmei Yisroel* also followed *Rabbi Akiva's* lead. *Bar Kochba* actually had all the criteria needed to qualify as *Moshiach*. But, as the *Rambam* tells us, we can only know *for sure* if He is *Moshiach* when he is successful in gathering all the Jews back to *Eretz Yisroel* and rebuilding the *Bais Hamikdash*. There was a *Tana*, *Rabbi Yochanan ben Torasa*, a convert to Judaism, who warned *Rabbi Akiva* that “grass will be growing out of your cheeks and *Moshiach* still will not have come.” In other words, *Bar Kochba* is not the *Moshiach*, and you will be long dead and buried while *Moshiach* has still not arrived. Sadly, this time *Rabbi Yochanan ben Torasa* was right, as we shall yet see. It is a testimony to the honesty of *Chazal* that they reported that *Rabbi Akiva* had originally believed in *Bar Kochba*, but that it turned out to not to be so.

Now Rome responded in full force, by sending their top general with massive troops to regain control. They started from the north of *Eretz Yisroel*, conquering one town at a time, murdering any Jews they found in the cruelest ways. It proved

too much for *Bar Kochba's* army. The Romans destroyed all sources of food, to the point where there weren't even any olives to be gotten in Eretz Yisroel. They blockaded the ports so that ships bringing food supplies could not get through.

Eventually, all the cities of *Yehuda* came under Roman control, and *Bar Kochba* and his men had to flee from *Yerushalayim* to the fortress city of *Beitar*. There in *Beitar* was the elderly *Tana*, *Rabbi Elazar Hamodaey*, and *Raban Shimon ben Gamliel*, who was still a child learning in cheder.

The Romans besieged the city for three and a half years, causing hunger and thirst inside *Beitar*. Inside *Beitar* there were over six hundred thousand men, women and children. The Romans were unable to break down the fortifications of *Beitar*. *Chazal* tell us that this was in the merit of the constant *tefilos* of that great *tzadik*, *Rabbi Elazar Hamodaey*. Every day he would pray, while covered in sack cloth and ashes, "Master of the world, do not sit in judgement today, do not sit in judgement today!" Please don't look at our sins, and spare us for one more day.

***Bar Kochba* murders his uncle**

The troops of *Bar Kochba* continued to fight the Romans valiantly, and the frustrated Romans were about to withdraw. One of our ancient enemies, a *Kusi*, told Hadrian not to leave yet, because "As long as this rooster (*Rabbi Elazar Hamodaey*) is rolling in his ashes (busy with his prayers), you will never conquer the city." He promised to find a way for the Romans to get into the city. What did he do? He entered the city through one of the waste pipes, and went up to *Rabbi Elazar Hamodaey* while he was dovening with his eyes closed. He pretended to be whispering something in his ear.

People who saw this went immediately to *Bar Kochba* to warn him that his uncle is plotting to surrender to the Romans, (just as *Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai* had wanted to do many years before). They brought the *Kusi* before *Bar Kochba*, who told his well rehearsed story to *Bar Kochba*, that *Rabbi Elazar* wants to make peace with the Roman emperor. By this time, *Bar Kochba* was somewhat paranoid, and very concerned about the future. He waited till his uncle finished *dovening* and asked him what the *Kusi* had said to him. *Rabbi Elazar* said he hadn't heard anything because he was concentrating on his prayers. But since *Bar Kochba's* suspicions had already been aroused, he became full of rage and gave his uncle a kick. *Rabbi Elazar* died on the spot, and a heavenly voice came out and stated that *Bar Kochba* too would be killed. Indeed, on that very day, Tisha B'av, the Romans gained access to the city and *Bar Kochba* was killed. Without *Rabbi Elazar's*

tefilos, the sins of the people were indeed judged, and retribution was forthcoming.

A bloody massacre

When the Romans finally entered the city, they were bent on revenge, and showed no mercy for young or old. The men of Beitar continued to fight valiantly, in spite of starving from lack of food and thirst for lack of water, and killed thousands of the enemy. Nevertheless, they were no match for the Roman legions, and everyone in the city perished. *Raban Shimon ben Gamliel* later said that when he was a *cheder* child in *Beitar*, the children would say that if the enemy enters the city they would stab them with their writing tools, but in the end, none were left from the tens of thousands except for *Raban Shimon ben Gamliel*. The Gemora describes the tremendous amount of blood that was spilt, which the gentiles in the surroundings were able to use for fertilizer for the next seven years.

This was actually the very first time that the Roman armies had been challenged so successfully, and now the emperor was bent on spiteful revenge. He owned a vineyard in the area which was eighteen *mil* in length by eighteen *mil* in width. A *mil* is two thousand *amos*. That is the equivalent of a circumference of almost fifty miles. He fenced in the vineyard by taking the bodies of the fallen people of *Beitar*, had them placed standing up erect, pressed together, with their hands up in the air, and decreed that they were not allowed to be buried. If two corpses can fit in an *ama*, that would equal over a quarter of a million bodies.

It wasn't until Hadrian's death that permission was given to bury the corpses. Throughout all the long years that they had been fencing Hadrian's vineyard, there was an open miracle that the bodies did not decompose.

The *Birkas Hamazon* originally had only the first three blessings. On the day that the corpses were allowed to be buried, the sages in *Yavneh* added a fourth *bracha*, *Hatov V'hamativ*, (the One Who is good and does good). Good: that they did not decompose, and does good: that they were finally allowed to be buried. It is most noteworthy that the sages expressed only gratitude to Hashem for the favors He bestowed upon them, in spite of the fact that the Jewish people had just been through a holocaust. This is the attitude of *Klal Yisroel*: to accept whatever Hashem does without complaint, and thank Him for His benevolent favors that He bestows upon us even while we are suffering.

Not without fault

The people of *Beitar* were not totally without fault. *Chazal* tell us that *Baitar* was

destroyed because they did not mourn for the destruction of *Yerushalayim* and the *Bais Hamikdash*. When citizens of *Baitar* would go up to *Yerushalayim* and the *Bais Hamikdash*, they were often swindled by dishonest people in *Yerushalayim*. They developed a seething hatred for the populace of *Yerushalayim*, and when it was destroyed, they lit candles and celebrated. Although their grievances may have been correct, they should still have been saddened by the destruction of Hashem's city and *Bais Hamikdash*. The *Midrash* applies to them the verse that says, "One who rejoices over the downfall (of his enemy) will not be considered innocent."

After churban Beitar

The Romans were out for blood as revenge for the fight that the Jewish people had made against them. They were not at all used to such resistance. Their desire now was to destroy the entire Jewish people, which they set about doing in the most brutal manner. Thousands and thousands of Jews were murdered by them throughout all of *Eretz Yehuda*. Countless Jews were taken into captivity to be sent by ship to Egypt to be sold in the slave markets there. Just as the Torah had predicted in the very last verse of the *tochacha*, there were so many slaves that no one was even interested in buying them, and so they had no way to support themselves and died from sickness and hunger.

Endless persecutions, miraculous survival

From this time on, the Jewish population in *Eretz Yisroel* was very sparse, and most Jews were scattered around the countries of the vast Roman empire. But the travails seem to be never ending. Since that time, our people suffered through almost constant persecutions. Among them were the Crusades, and the Spanish inquisition, ending in the expulsion from Spain in 1492; the brutal attacks of Bogdan Chmielnicki in 1648 - 1649, which wiped out a third of the Jewish population of Poland; pogroms in Russia, and the Holocaust. These are only a sampling of all we have suffered, almost constantly, at the hands of the host nations among whom we have lived. This is called *galus Edom*, the exile which Rome initiated.

Rav Yaakov Emden states that the greatest miracle of all is the survival of the Jewish people in their almost two thousand year exile. A nation dispersed around the globe, hated by their hosts and defenceless, should logically not be in existence any more. But we are here, because the Creator promised in His Torah that *Am Yisroel* and its Torah are for all eternity. May *Hashem Yisborach* grant us His divine

favor, that we continue to live, to thrive, to keep on learning His Torah and doing His mitzvos, until the appearance of *Moshiach Tzidkeinu*, speedily in our days. *Amen.*

The Ani Maamin Foundation

This historical essay is just one facet of the activities of the Ani Maamin Foundation. Ani Maamin's goal is to spread *chizuk* in *emunah* in our Torah world to educators, parents and students alike. By creating audio and written materials that show how compelling our *emunah* really is, we hope to bring about a heightened awareness and clarity in *emunah* to *bnei Torah* everywhere.

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