

**Chavruta: Unity, Schism and Foreign Culture:
The War of Hyrcanus and Aristobulus and the Murder of Onias**

Vered Noam

1. Josephus, Ant. 14:19-28

[19] Because of these promises which were made to him, Aretas marched against Aristobulus with an army of fifty thousand horsemen and footsoldiers as well, and defeated him in battle. After his victory many deserted to Hyrcanus, and Aristobulus, being left alone, fled to Jerusalem. [20] Thereupon the Arab king took his whole army and attacked the temple, where he besieged Aristobulus; and the citizens, joining Hyrcanus' side, assisted him in the siege, while only the priests remained loyal to Aristobulus. [21] And so Aretas placed the camps of the Arabs and Jews next to one another, and pressed the siege vigorously. But as this action took place at the time of observing the festival of Unleavened Bread, which we call Phaska (τούτων δὲ γινομένων κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς τῶν ἄζύμων ἑορτῆς, ἣν πάσχα λέγομεν), the Jews of best repute left the country and fled to Egypt. [22] Now there was a certain Onias, who, being a righteous man and dear to God (δικαίον ὄντα καὶ θεοφιλή), had once in a rainless period prayed to God to end the drought, and God had heard his prayer and sent rain; this man hid himself when he saw that the civil war continued to rage, but he was taken to the camp of the Jews and was asked to place a curse on Aristobulus and his fellow-rebels, just as he had, by his prayers, put an end to the rainless period. [23] But when in spite of his refusals and excuses he was forced to speak by the mob, he stood up in their midst and said, [24] "Oh God, king of the universe (ὦ θεὲ βασιλεῦ τῶν ὅλων), since these men standing by me are Thy people, and those who are besieged are Thy priests, I beseech you not to hearken to them against these men nor to bring to pass what these men ask Thee to do to those others." And when he had prayed in this manner the villains among the Jews who stood round him stoned him to death.

[25] But God straightaway punished them for this savagery, and exacted satisfaction for the murder of Onias in the following manner. While the priests and Aristobulus were being besieged, there happened to come round the festival called Phaska (τὴν ἑορτὴν ἐπιστῆναι τὴν καλουμένην φάσκα), at which it is our custom to offer numerous sacrifices to God. [26] But as Aristobulus and those with him lacked victims, they asked their countrymen to furnish them with these, and take as much money for the victims as they wished. And when these others demanded that they pay a thousand drachmas for each animal they wished to get, Aristobulus and the priests willingly accepted this price and gave them the money, which they let down from the walls by a rope (διὰ τῶν τευχῶν καθιμήσαντες). [27] Their countrymen, however, after receiving the money did not deliver the victims, but went to such lengths of villainy that they violated their pledges and acted impiously toward God by not furnishing the sacrificial victims to those who were in need of them (τοῖς δεομένοις). [28] But the priests, on suffering this breach of faith, prayed to God to exact satisfaction on their behalf from their countrymen; and He did not delay their punishment, but sent a mighty and violent wind to destroy the crops of the entire country, so that the people at that time had to pay eleven drachmas for a modius of wheat.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | <i>b. Menah.</i> 64b | מנחות סד ע"ב |
| | Our Rabbis taught: | תנו רבנן |
| 1 | When the Kings of the Hasmonean house besieged one another, Hyrcanus was outside and Aristobulus within [the city wall] | כשצרו מלכי בית חשמונאי זה על זה היה הורקנוס מבחוץ ואריסטובלוס מבפנים |
| 2 | Each day [those that were within] used to let down [to the other party] <i>denars</i> in a basket, and haul up [in return] animals for the daily offerings. | בכל יום ויום היו משלשלין להם דינרי' בקופה ומעלין להם תמידין |
| 3 | There was an old man there, who was learned in Greek wisdom. | היה שם זקן אחד שהיה מכיר בחכמת יוونית |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 4 | [He said to them:] “As long as they carry on the Temple service they will never be delivered into your hands.” | <אמ' להן: > כל זמן שעסוקין בעבודה אין נמסרין בידכם |
| 5 | On the morrow they let down <i>denars</i> in a basket and hauled up a pig. | למחר שילשלו להם דינר' בקופה והעלו להן חזיר |
| 6 | When it reached halfway up the wall, it stuck its claws into the wall, | כיון שהגיע לחצי חומה נעץ ציפרניו בחומה |
| 7 | and the land of Israel was shaken over a distance of four hundred <i>parasangs</i> by four hundred <i>parasangs</i> . | ונזדעזעה ארץ ישר' ארבע מאות פרסה על ארבע מאות פרסה |
| 8 | At that time they declared, ‘Cursed be the man who rears pigs and cursed be the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom!’ | באותה שעה אמרו ארור אדם שיגדל חזירים וארור אדם שילמד את בנו חכמת יונית |
| 9 | It was concerning this time [of siege] that we learnt: It once happened that the ‘ <i>Omer</i> was brought from Gaggoth Zerifin and the two loaves from the valley of Bet Soker. | על אותה שעה שנינו מעשה שבא העומר מגגות צריפין ושתי הלחם מבקעת בית סוכר |

Questions:

Read Josephus carefully. Can you identify redundancy in the stories? Where? Look at the sequence of lines 25-26, and then at line 28. What's strange here? Compare lines 24 and 28 – do you see any difficulty? How does all this help us reconstruct Josephus' editorial work here?

Now read the Talmudic parallel. What are the differences between the two versions?

Do the Onias story and the sacrifices story carry the same message? What is it? In which version (Josephus, Bavli) of the siege story is this message more conspicuous?