Rebbe and Antoninus: Jews and Romans in Action

In the midst of a halakhic sugya regarding doing business with non-Jews during their holiday season, the Gemara offers a story about Rebbe and Antoninus (thought to be Roman Emperor Caracalla, who ruled from 198-217 CE). Ostensibly the purpose of the story is to teach us that Roman kings indeed may appoint their sons to rule after them, but the story teaches so much more about relationships between Jewish leaders and Roman leaders. How does this elongated discussion of Rebbe and Antoninus contribute to our understanding of the discussions in Avodah Zara about Jews and non-Jews?

Add this: וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לַאדֹנִי לְעֵשָׂו *(בראשית לב, ה)*, רַבֵּנוּ אָמַר לְרַבִּי אַפֵּס כְּתוּב חַד אִגְּרָא מִן שְׁמֵי לְמָרָן מַלְכָּא אַנְטוֹנִינוֹס, קֻם וּכְתַב מִן יְהוּדָה נְשִׂיאָה לְמָרָן מַלְכָּא אַנְטוֹנִינוֹס, נְסַבֵּיהּ וּקְרֵיהּ וּקְרֵעֵיהּ, אָמַר לֵיהּ כְּתוּב מִן עַבְדָּךְ יְהוּדָה לְמָרָן מַלְכָּא אַנְטוֹנִינוֹס. אָמַר לֵיהּ רַבִּי מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה מְבַזֶּה עַל כְּבוֹדָךְ, אָמַר לֵיהּ מָה אָנָא טַב מִן סָבִי, לֹא כָּךְ אָמַר *(בראשית לב, ה)*: כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב.

בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה שֶׁקָּרָא יַעֲקֹב לְעֵשָׂו אָדֹנִי, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אַתָּה הִשְׁפַּלְתָּ עַצְמְךָ וְקָרָאתָ לְעֵשָׂו אָדֹנִי ח' פְּעָמִים, חַיֶּיךָ אֲנִי מַעֲמִיד מִבָּנָיו שְׁמוֹנָה מְלָכִים קֹדֶם לְבָנֶיךָ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר *(בראשית לו, לא)*: וְאֵלֶּה הַמְּלָכִים אֲשֶׁר מָלְכוּ וגו

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1. עבודה זרה י.

וְהָתַנְיָא: יוֹם גִּינּוּסְיָא וְיוֹם הַלֵּידָה! לָא קַשְׁיָא: הָא דִּידֵיהּ, הָא דְּבַרְיֵהּ.

The Gemara asks: But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: Two gentile festivals are the day of *geinuseya* and the birthday. Once again, these two events cannot be the same. The Gemara answers: It is not difficult: This, the day of *geinuseya*, is referring to the birthday of the king himself, whereas that, the birthday mentioned in the *baraita*, is referring to the birthday of his son.

וְהָתַנְיָא: יוֹם גִּינּוּסְיָא שֶׁלּוֹ, יוֹם גִּינּוּסְיָא שֶׁל בְּנוֹ, וְיוֹם הַלֵּידָה שֶׁלּוֹ, וְיוֹם הַלֵּידָה שֶׁל בְּנוֹ! אֶלָּא מַאי ״יוֹם גִּינּוּסְיָא״? יוֹם שֶׁמַּעֲמִידִין בּוֹ מַלְכָּם, וְלָא קַשְׁיָא — הָא דִּידֵיהּ, הָא דְּבַרְיֵהּ.

The Gemara further asks: But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: The day of *geinuseya* of the king, the day of *geinuseya* of his son, and the king's birthday and the birthday of his son? If so, the *geinuseya* cannot be either his or his son's birthday. Rather, what is meant by the day of *geinuseya*? In fact it is referring to the day on which the gentiles appoint and crown their king. And the fact that a *baraita* mentions both the day of *geinuseya* and the day on which the gentiles appoint and crown their king is not difficult, as this, the day of *geinuseya*, is referring to his own coronation, whereas that, the day on which the gentiles appoint and crown their king, is referring to the coronation of his son.

וְאִי קַשְׁיָא לָךְ דְּלָא מוֹקְמִי מַלְכָּא בַּר מַלְכָּא, עַל יְדֵי שְׁאֵלָה מוֹקְמִי, כְּגוֹן אַסְוִירוֹס בַּר אַנְטוֹנִינוֹס דְּמָלַךְ.

And if it is difficult for you that which was stated earlier, that the Romans do not appoint as king the son of the king, in fact they do appoint a son of the king as king through the request of the king. For example, there was Asveirus, son of Antoninus, who ruled at the request of Antoninus.

אָמַר לֵיהּ אַנְטוֹנִינוּס לְרַבִּי: בָּעֵינָא דְּיִמְלוֹךְ אַסְוִירוּס בְּרִי תְּחוֹתַי, וְתִתְעֲבֵיד טְבֶרְיָא קָלָנְיָא, וְאִי אֵימָא לְהוּ חֲדָא — עָבְדִי, תְּרֵי — לָא עָבְדִי. אֲיִתִי גַּבְרָא, אַרְכְּבֵיהּ אַחַבְרֵיהּ, וִיהַב לֵיהּ יוֹנָה לְעִילָּאי (בִּידֵיהּ), וַאֲמַר לֵיהּ לְתַתַּאי: אֵימַר (לעילא דלמפרח) [לְעִילָּאי דְּנָפְרַח] יוֹנָה מִן יְדֵיהּ. אָמַר: שְׁמַע מִינַּהּ הָכִי קָאָמַר לִי: אַתְּ בְּעֵי מִינַּיְיהוּ דְּ״אַסְוִירוּס בְּרִי יִמְלוֹךְ תְּחוֹתַי״, וְאֵימָא לֵיהּ לְאַסְוִירוּס דְּתִתְעֲבֵיד טְבֶרְיָא קָלָנְיָא.

The Gemara provides the background for this assertion. It is related that Antoninus said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: I wish for Asveirus my son to rule instead of me, and that the city Tiberias be released [*kelaneya*] from paying taxes. And if I tell the Roman senate one of my wishes, they will do as I wish, but if I ask for two of them they will not do as I wish. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi conveyed his answer in the following manner: He brought a man, placed him on the shoulders of another man, and put a dove in the hands of the one on top. And he said to the one on the bottom: Tell the one on top that he should cause the dove to fly from his hands. Antoninus said to himself: Learn from it that this is what Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is saying to me: You should ask the Senate: Let Asveirus my son rule instead of me, and say to Asveirus that he should release Tiberias from paying taxes.

Religion, Miracles, Jewish Triumph

2. עבודה זרה י:

יוֹמָא חַד אַשְׁכְּחֵיהּ לְרַבִּי חֲנִינָא בַּר חָמָא דַּהֲוָה יָתֵיב. אָמַר: לָא אָמֵינָא לָךְ בְּעִידָּנָא דְּאָתֵינָא לָא נַשְׁכַּח גְּבַר קַמָּךְ? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: לֵית דֵּין בַּר אֱינָשׁ. אָמַר לֵיהּ: אֵימָא לֵיהּ לְהָהוּא עַבְדָּא דְּגָנֵי אַבָּבָא דְּקָאֵים וְלֵיתֵי…

One day, Antoninus found that Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama was sitting there. He said: Did I not tell you that when I come to visit, let no man be found before you? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: This is not a human being; he is like an angel, and you have nothing to fear from him. Antoninus said to Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama: Tell that servant who is sleeping at the entrance that he should rise and come…

כֹּל יוֹמָא הֲוָה מְשַׁמֵּשׁ לְרַבִּי, מַאֲכֵיל לֵיהּ, מַשְׁקֵי לֵיהּ. כִּי הֲוָה בָּעֵי רַבִּי לְמִיסַּק לְפוּרְיָא, הֲוָה גָּחֵין קַמֵּי פּוּרְיָא, אֲמַר לֵיהּ: סַק עִילָּוַאי לְפוּרְיָיךְ. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: לָאו אוֹרַח אַרְעָא לְזַלְזוֹלֵי בְּמַלְכוּתָא כּוּלֵּי הַאי. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: מִי יְשַׁמֵּנִי מַצָּע תַּחְתֶּיךָ לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

The Gemara relates: Every day Antoninus would minister to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi; he would feed him and give him to drink. When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi wanted to ascend to his bed, Antoninus would bend down in front of the bed and say to him: Ascend upon me to your bed. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said in response: It is not proper conduct to treat the king with this much disrespect. Antoninus said: Oh, that I were set as a mattress under you in the World-to-Come!

3. תוספות עבודה זרה י: ד"ה אמר ליה א"כ

…אמרינן במדרש חלב מטמא חלב מטהר כשנולד רבי גזרו שלא למול ואביו ואמו מלוהו שלח קיסר והביאו לרבי ואמו לפניו והחליפתו אמו באנטונינוס והניקתו עד שהביאתו לפני קיסר ומצאוהו ערל ופטרום לשלום ואמר אותו הגמון אני ראיתי שמלו את זה אלא הקב"ה עושה להם נסים בכל עת ובטלו הגזרה ואמרי' נמי בירושלמי שלסוף למד אנטונינוס תורה ונתגייר ומל עצמו:

…We said in the Midrash: Milk defiles, and milk purifies. When Rebbe was born, they (=the Romans) had decreed not to circumcise, but his father and mother circumcised him. Caesar sent and brought Rebbe and his mother before him, and his mother replaced him with Antoninus and nursed him until they brought him before Caesar, and they found him

uncircumcised, and they let them go in peace. And that caesar said: “I saw that they circumcised him, but God performs miracles for them constantly,” and they annulled the decree. And we also said in the Yerushalmi that in the end Antoninus studied Torah, converted and circumcised himself.

A Time of Relative Calm

4. עבודה זרה י:

כֹּל יוֹמָא הֲוָה (שדר) [מְשַׁדַּר] לֵיהּ דַּהֲבָא פְּרִיכָא בְּמַטָּרָאתָא, וְחִישֵׁי אַפּוּמַיְיהוּ. אֲמַר לְהוּ: אַמְטִיו חִישֵׁי לְרַבִּי. אֲמַר [לֵיהּ רַבִּי]: לָא צְרִיכְנָא, אִית לִי טוּבָא. אֲמַר: לִיהְוֵי לְמַאן דְּבָתְרָךְ, דְּיָהֲבִי לְבָתְרַאי דְּאָתוּ בָּתְרָךְ, וּדְאָתֵי מִינַּיְיהוּ נִיפּוֹק עֲלַיְיהוּ.
The Gemara relates: Every day Antoninus would send to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi crushed gold in large sacks, with wheat in the opening of the sacks. He would say to his servants: Bring this wheat to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and they did not realize that the bags actually contained gold. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to Antoninus: I do not need gold, as I have plenty. Antoninus said: The gold should be for those who will come after you, who will give it to the last ones who come after you. And those who descend from them will bring forth the gold that I now give you, and will be able to pay taxes to the Romans from this money.

5. בבא מציעא לג.-:

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: הָעוֹסְקִין בְּמִקְרָא – מִדָּה וְאֵינָהּ מִדָּה, בַּמִּשְׁנָה – מִדָּה וְנוֹטְלִין עָלֶיהָ שָׂכָר, בַּתַּלְמוּד – אֵין לָךְ מִדָּה גְּדוֹלָה מִזּוּ, וּלְעוֹלָם הֱוֵי רָץ לַמִּשְׁנָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַתַּלְמוּד.
The Sages taught in a *baraita*: For those who engage in the study of Bible, it is a virtue but not a complete virtue. For those who engage in the study of Mishna, it is a virtue and they receive reward for its study. For those who engage in the study of Talmud, you have no virtue greater than that. And always pursue study of the Mishna more than study of the Talmud.

הָא גּוּפָא קַשְׁיָא. אָמַרְתְּ בַּתַּלְמוּד אֵין לְךָ מִדָּה גְּדוֹלָה מִזּוּ, וַהֲדַר אָמַרְתְּ: וּלְעוֹלָם הֱוֵי רָץ לַמִּשְׁנָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַתַּלְמוּד! אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן:
The Gemara asks: This matter itself is difficult, as the *baraita* is self-contradictory. You said: For those who engage in the study of Talmud, you have no virtue greater than that. And then you said: And always pursue study of the Mishna more than study of the Talmud. Rabbi Yoḥanan says:

בִּימֵי רַבִּי נְשָׂנִית מִשְׁנָה זוֹ, שְׁבַקוּ כּוּלֵּי עָלְמָא מַתְנִיתִין וַאֲזַלוּ בָּתַר תַּלְמוּדָא, הֲדַר דְּרַשׁ לְהוּ: וּלְעוֹלָם הֱוֵי רָץ לַמִּשְׁנָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַתַּלְמוּד.
It was during the era of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi that the beginning of this *baraita* extolling the study of Talmud was taught. The result was that everyone abandoned study of the Mishna and pursued the study of the Talmud. It was then that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi taught them: And always pursue study of the Mishna more than study of the Talmud, as without a firm basis in the fundamental *halakhot* of the Mishna, talmudic discourse is futile.

6. רש"י בבא מציעא לג: ד"ה בימי רבי

בימי רבי נשנית משנה זו - הא דקתני תלמוד אין לך מדה גדולה מזו לפי שמשרבו תלמידי שמאי והלל שהיו לפניו שלשה דורות רבו מחלוקות בתורה ונעשית כשתי תורות מתוך עול שעבוד מלכיות וגזירות שהיו גוזרין עליהן ומתוך כך לא היו יכולים לתת לב לברר דברי החולקים עד ימיו של רבי שנתן הקב"ה לו חן בעיני אנטונינוס מלך רומי כדאמרינן בעבודה זרה (דף י.) ונחו מצרה ושלח וקבץ כל תלמידי ארץ ישראל ועד ימיו לא היו מסכתות סדורות אלא כל תלמיד ששמע דבר מפי גדול הימנו גרסה ונתן סימנים הלכה פלונית ופלונית שמעתי משם פלוני וכשנתקבצו אמר כל אחד מה ששמע ונתנו לב לברר טעמי המחלוקת דברי מי ראוין לקיים וסידרו המסכתות דברי נזיקין לבדם ודברי יבמות לבדם ודברי קדשים לבדם וסתם נמי במשנה דברי יחידים שראה רבי את דבריהם ושנאן סתם כדי לקבוע הלכה כמותם לפיכך אמרו בגמרא אין לך מדה גדולה מזו שיתנו לב לטעמי המשנה:

Since from the time of the disciples of Shammai and Hillel, three generations before him [meaning Rebbi], there were great disputes regarding the meanings of the Torah and there arose the possibility of there being two Torahs amongst Israel, due to the oppression of the kingdom [Rome] and the evil decrees passed against Israel. Because of these [troubles] they [the scholars of Israel] were unable to clarify the differing opinions and settle them, until [came] the time of Rebbi. Then did the Lord give favor unto Rebbi in the eyes of the Roman emperor, Antonius, and the troubles subsided, and Rebbi was able to gather all of the scholars of the Land of Israel to him [in Beit She'arim and Tzippori]. Until his [Rebbi's] days, there were no ordered tractates [of the Oral Law] but rather every student studied and reviewed lectures that he heard from the great men and he ascribed to them these teaching s-"this halachah heard from this and this scholar." Now, when they all gathered together [at Rebbi's yeshivah], each of the scholars repeated what he had learned and together they worked to clarify the reasons behind disparate opinions and they settled as to which opinion was to be deemed correct. And then they ordered these opinions and decisions into tractates: the laws of torts by themselves, the laws of levirate marriages by themselves, the laws of the Temple service by themselves, [etc]. And they quoted the opinions and decisions of many scholars anonymously, for Rebbi agreed with their decisions and therefore quoted them anonymously in order to indicate that so is the halachah.

7. **רבנית יעל שלוסבורג, רבי ואנטונינוס: להבנת רש"י תמוה בחומש בראשית, שמעתין 142-141 (תש"ס) 56 -64**

החיבור הזה נוצר מפני "שנתן הקב"ה לו (לרבי) חן בעיני אנטונינוס מלך רומי" על מנת שהיסטורית יווצר מצב בו יוכל רבי יהודה הנשיא להקים ולסיים את המפעל המונומנטאלי של עריכת המשנה וחתימתה!

אי-אפשר היה לערוך את המשנה בתקופה שקדמה לימי רבי, היא תקופת השמד (שנמשכה כ-200 שנה) ואף לא בתקופה שלאחריו, בה שוב הכבידו הרומאים את עולם הכבד. עריכת המשנה דרשה התבססות של הישוב, יכולת ללמוד תורה בניחותא ובהרחבת הדעת, שחרור מעול כלכלי כבד וביסוס סמכות בית דינו של רבי, וכל אלו הגיעו לידי מימוש בתקופה זו מתוך ובגלל הקשרים המיוחדים בין רבי לאנטונינוס.

This compilation (=i.e., Mishnah) was created because “God gave him (Rebbe) grace in the eyes of Antoninus king of Rome,” so that historically there would be a time period in which R. Judah the Prince could complete the monumental work of editing and sealing the Mishnah! It would have been impossible to edit the Mishnah in the time period preceding Rebbe because it was a time of persecution (which lasted about 200 years), not in the time period after him, in which the Romans again burdened the Jews extensively. The editing of the Mishnah required a basis of being settled, the ability to learn Torah in comfort and with broad-mindedness’ freedom from heavy financial burden and the establishment of authority for Rebbe’s *bet din*. And all of these came to fruition in this time period from and because of the special relationship between Rebbe and Antoninus.

A Critique of Rebbe: He Changed

8. עבודה זרה י:-יא.

אָמַר [לֵיהּ רַבִּי]: לָא צָרִיכְנָא, אִית לִי טוּבָא…

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to Antoninus: I do not need gold, as I have plenty…

אָמַר לֵיהּ: אָתֵינָא לְעָלְמָא דְּאָתֵי? אָמַר לֵיהּ: אִין. אָמַר לֵיהּ: וְהָכְתִיב ״לֹא יִהְיֶה שָׂרִיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו״! בְּעוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה עֵשָׂו.

On another occasion, Antoninus said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: Will I enter the World-to-Come? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: Yes. Antoninus said to him: But isn’t it written: “And there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau” (Obadiah 1:18)? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi answered: The verse is stated with regard to those who perform actions similar to those of the wicked Esau, not to people like you.

תַּנְיָא נָמֵי הָכִי: ״לֹא יִהְיֶה שָׂרִיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו״ — יָכוֹל לַכֹּל? תַּלְמוּד לוֹמַר: ״לְבֵית עֵשָׂו״, בְּעוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה עֵשָׂו.

This is also taught in a *baraita*: From the verse: “And there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau,” one might have thought that this applies to everyone descended from Esau, irrespective of an individual’s actions. Therefore, the verse states: “Of the house of Esau,” to indicate that the verse is stated only with regard to those who continue in the way of Esau, and perform actions similar to those of Esau.

אָמַר לֵיהּ: וְהָכְתִיב ״שָׁמָּה אֱדוֹם מְלָכֶיהָ וְכָל נְשִׂיאֶיהָ״! אָמַר לֵיהּ: ״מְלָכֶיהָ״ — וְלֹא כָּל מְלָכֶיהָ, ״כָּל נְשִׂיאֶיהָ״ — וְלֹא כָּל שָׂרֶיהָ…

Antoninus said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: But isn’t it written in the description of the netherworld: “There is Edom, her kings and all her leaders” (Ezekiel 32:29)? Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: The verse states: “Her kings,” but not: All of her kings, and likewise it states: “All her leaders,” but not: All of her officers. Some of them will merit the World-to-Come…

״וַיֹּאמֶר ה׳ לָהּ, שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנֵךְ״. אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: אַל תִּקְרֵי ״גּוֹיִם״ אֶלָּא ״גֵּיִים״, זֶה אַנְטוֹנִינוּס וְרַבִּי, שֶׁלֹּא פָּסְקוּ מֵעַל שׁוּלְחָנָם לֹא חֲזֶרֶת וְלֹא קִישׁוּת וְלֹא צְנוֹן, לֹא בֵּימוֹת הַחַמָּה וְלֹא בֵּימוֹת הַגְּשָׁמִים, דְּאָמַר מָר: צְנוֹן מְחַתֵּךְ אוֹכֶל, חֲזֶרֶת מְהַפֵּךְ מַאֲכָל, קִישׁוּת מַרְחִיב מֵעַיִים.

§ The Gemara returns to its discussion of Antoninus: When the matriarch Rebecca was pregnant with Jacob and Esau, “the Lord said to her: Two nations [*goyim*] are in your womb”

(Genesis 25:23). Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: Do not read it as *goyim*, meaning nations; rather read it as *geyim*, meaning proud ones. This verse was fulfilled in two prominent individuals who descended from Rebecca, Antoninus and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, whose tables, due to their wealth, never lacked for lettuce, nor cucumbers, nor radish, neither in the summer nor in the rainy season, despite the fact that these foods do not grow year round. The reason they ensured that these items were always present at their tables is that the Master said: A radish breaks up food, lettuce stirs up food, and cucumbers expand the intestines.