

The Martyrdom of Ben-Teradion: Between Body and Text

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Recently, I began to examine the ways in which the stories of the ten martyrs who were executed in the second century CE are presented in modern Hebrew literature.¹ The movement of these stories from their sources in rabbinical literature to Modern Hebrew literature serves as a prism through which we can look at the complex place of rabbinic sources in Modern Hebrew literature.

Many scholars of Jewish and Christian Studies have studied the relationship between early Christianity and the Jewish world.² The question of when and how Judaism and Christianity went their separate ways is a delicate issue: Was it a gradual process that developed over many years, or was it rather a rapid split whereby Christianity built itself from early on as a separate religion? There is a great difference of opinion on the subject, with some describing a slow, dialogic process, and others recounting an abrupt divorce. A most interesting theme in this context, which serves as a sort of prism to refract the larger questions, is the theological status of *martyrdom* – dying on *Kiddush Hashem*, sacrificing yourself for your belief in God – in Judaism as against Christianity.³

Without going too deeply into the specifics of various approaches, the key difference between the concept of martyrdom in Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries CE, has to do with the theological status of the act itself. Traditional Christian tales often glorify martyrdom as a kind of coveted theological peak, allowing the believer to achieve the ultimate union with Christ. Consequently, as Aviad Kleinberg shows,⁴ in many Christian traditions the believer implores his captors to kill him and rid him of this world, the world of carnal sin, so that he may join Christ. Christian martyr stories frequently dwell on the posthumous, depicting the martyr's progress towards heaven and the sought-after union with Christ. Thus we find, in the early Christian text known as the *Passion of Saint Perpetua* which contains the diary of the famous 2nd century martyr Vibia Perpetua – the following description:

We had suffered [...] and we passed out of the flesh, and we began to be carried towards the east by four angels whose hand touched us not. [...] . And passing over the world's edge we saw a very great light; and I said to Perpetua: This which the Lord promised us; we have received His promise. [...]. And there in the garden were four other angels, more glorious than

the rest; who when they saw us gave us honor and said to the other angels: here are they, here are they: and marveled. And the four angels who bore us set us down trembling [...]. The other angels said to us: Come first, go in, and salute the Lord.⁵

The Jewish conception of martyrdom, on the other hand, and particularly in the Talmud, does not interpret the martyric act strictly as a religious ideal; it is taken sometimes as a political necessity, or even as Ra'anah (Abusch) Bousthan has noted, as punishment for personal sin.⁶ What I will try to do is to demonstrate how this theological ambivalence towards martyrdom is expressed in the Talmudic tradition concerning the execution of Haninah son of Teradion, one of the famous *Aseret Harugei Malchut*, or the Ten Martyrs. Towards the end of this article I will also hint at some reincarnations of this story in Modern Hebrew literature.

R. Haninah son of Teradion is one of Ten Martyrs – ten sages who were executed, according to Jewish tradition, as part of Roman Emperor Hadrian's persecution of Judaism in the 2nd century CE. Haninah son of Teradion is first mentioned as a martyr in *Sifrei Devarim* – an Eretz Yisraeli Tannaitic source from the 3rd century CE.⁷ But the story finds its fullest development in the Babylonian Talmud, a later text from around the 6th or 7th century CE. The Talmud in *Avodah Zarah* tractate, presents two narratives contrasting Hanina's martyric figure with that of another sage who does not wish to die as a martyr. I will confine myself here only to the second narrative, which is the one that has been further developed in Jewish tradition, influencing both medieval Jewish culture and Modern Hebrew literature. In this story, Rabbi Jose son of Kisma confronts R. Hanina and suggests an altogether different cultural and theological choice to martyrdom.

Babylonian Talmud <i>Avoda Zarah</i> 18a	
Translation	Source
Our Rabbis taught: When R. Jose b. Kisma was ill, R. Hanina b. Teradion went to visit him	תנו רבנן: כשחלה רבי יוסי בן קיסמא, הלך רבי חנינא בן תרדיון לבקרו.
He said to him: 'Brother Hanina, did not you know that it is Heaven that has ordained this [Roman] nation to reign? For though they laid waste His House, burnt His Temple, slew His pious ones and caused His best ones to perish, still is they firmly established! Yet, I have heard that you sit and occupy yourself with the Torah, and publicly gather assemblies, and hold Torah in your bosom'	אמר לו: חנינא אחי, אי אתה יודע שאומה זו מן השמים המליכה? שהחריבה את ביתו ושרפה את היכלו, והרגה את חסידיו ואבדה את טוביו, ועדיין היא קיימת, ואני שמעתי עליך שאתה יושב ועוסק בתורה [ומקהיל קהלות ברבים] וספר מונח לך בהיקך!

He replied, 'Heaven will show mercy.'	אמר לו: מן השמים ירחמו.
'I,' he said, 'am telling you plain facts, and you say "Heaven will show mercy"! It will surprise me if they do not burn both you and the Torah by fire.'	אמר לו: אני אומר לך דברים של טעם, ואתה אומר לי מן השמים ירחמו, תמה אני אם לא ישרפו אותך ואת ספר תורה באש! [...]
It was said that within but few days R. Jose b. Kisma died and all the great men of Rome went to his burial and made great lamentation for him. On their return, they found R. Hanina b. Teradion sitting and occupying himself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies, and holds the Torah in his bosom. Straightaway they took hold of him, wrapped him in the Torah Scroll, placed bundles of branches around him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart, so that he should not die quickly.	אמרו: לא היו ימים מועטים עד שנפטר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא, והלכו כל גדולי רומי לקברו והספידוהו הספד גדול, ובחזרתן מצאוהו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ומקהיל קהלות ברבים וס"ת מונח לו בחיקו. הביאוהו וכרכוהו בס"ת, והקיפוהו בחבילי זמורות והציתו בהן את האור, והביאו ספוגין של צמר ושראוים במים והניחום על לבו, כדי שלא תצא נשמתו מהרה.
His daughter said 'Father, should I see you like that?'	אמרה לו בתו: אבא, אראך בכך?
He replied, 'If it were I alone being burnt it would have been a thing hard to bear; but now that I am burning together with the Torah, He who will have regard for the shame of the Torah will also have regard for my shame.'	אמר לה: אילמלי אני נשרפתי לבדי היה הדבר קשה לי, עכשיו שאני נשרף וס"ת עמי, מי שמבקש עלבונה של ס"ת הוא יבקש עלבוני.
His students asked, 'Rabbi, what do you see?'	אמרו לו תלמידיו: רבי, מה אתה רואה?
He answered them, 'The parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high [...]'	אמר להן: גליון נשרפין ואותיות פורחות [...]

This story has received a great deal of scholarly attention, and at first sight does seem to conform to conventional martyrologic lines.⁸ Haninah son of Teradion stands his ground, refuses to stop teaching the Torah, and is executed wrapped up in a Torah scroll. But things are actually not as simple as that, and the story reveals some ambiguity around the political and theological standing of the Romans, as well as around the elementary logic of the martyrologic idea.

Two sages are featured here. Jose son of Kisma and Haninah son of Teradion debate the theological legitimacy of the Roman reign in Judea, and then – whether its decrees should be obeyed. Jose son of Kisma, a tannaitic sage who appears in other sources as well,⁹ maintains a

radical theological point, saying: "... it is Heaven that has ordained this [Roman] nation to reign". The evidence he provides for his claim is that the Romans remain at the height of their power despite the fact that they have abused God's chosen people again and again, have destroyed His house and slain His believers. R. Jose argues, then, that this has theological implications: Roman violence is actually a manifestation of God's will in the world. Consequently, he believes that obeying the Romans actually realizes God's will, while defying them, and specifically disobeying the ban on teaching the Torah, is not merely irresponsible – both personally and politically – but also a sin unto God. For it was God who had crowned the Romans and given them permission to reign in the first place. Thus, when Haninah chooses to ignore Roman law and teach the Torah, he is not just being imprudent or unrealistic; he is insulting God. It may even be said that according to Jose son of Kisma, Haninah deserves his terrible punishment because he acts against God's wishes, gathering assemblies around himself and teaching the Torah in public.

Jose son of Kisma closes the political-theological dispute by saying "It will surprise me if they do not burn both you and the Torah by fire". Notably, this is not an expression of anxiety or fear for Hanina's fate or future. Nor is this an accurate *prophecy* concerning Haninah's death. Rather, by using the magical power of language, R. Jose *judges* Haninah and then *sentences* him to death.

In rabbinic literature, certain expressions carry magical significance, allowing sages to force their will on the world. Thus it has been said that "the curse of a Sage, though uttered without cause, takes effect".¹⁰ Sages are endowed with the remarkable ability to curse their fellow men, and their curses prove effectual even when they are unjust and countering the will of God Himself. The expression used by Jose son of Kisma "תמה אני" (it will surprise me) – is not some aimless thought, but rather a magical turn of phrase which recurs in various other places in the Talmud, allowing the sage to impose his will on reality. Thus the same Jose son of Kisma uses the expression in tractate *Yevamot*, in the context of the fate of a certain synagogue around Tiberias: "I shall be surprised if this Synagogue is not turned into a house of idolatry".¹¹ And then, that is exactly what happens: Jose son of Kisma's "surprise" is actually a magical action *turning* a synagogue into a house of idolatry. And in our own case, by using the words תמה אני he sentences Haninah to his terrible death.¹²

The second part of the story deals with Haninah's execution, all wrapped up in the Torah scroll. This part of the story has naturally been subject to much discussion, including most recently in Noa Walden's work.¹³ I will avoid a full analysis and refer strictly to the dialogue that Haninah holds with his daughter and students about his intimate relationship with the scroll wrapped around his body. Hanina takes comfort in burning with the Torah. And in reply to his students' question "Rabbi, what do you see?" he offers that famous answer: "גווילים נשרפים ואותיות פורחות באוויר" (The

parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high). Haninah uncouples the burning scroll from the letters written upon it: these break off and neither disappear nor burn, but rather soar into the air, disembodied from the textual material that used to hold them together.

I would like to dedicate the second part of this short article to look at the way in which, in modern Hebrew Literature, this answer: “The parchments are being burnt but the letters are soaring on high” has detached itself from the textual material that held it previously and have become a sort of living thing, carrying itself without its original story and context. In Modern Hebrew literature, the figure of Haninah son of Teradion, in all of its intricate depictions in rabbinic literature, has been almost erased, and his place as a martyr replaced by this image of burning, soaring text. In other words, in many cases Modern Hebrew literature has treated *the burning text* instead of the rabbi as the executed martyr.

I will demonstrate this replacement process with three short examples. Yosef Haim Brenner, in his 1904 novel "מסביב לנקודה" (Around the Point), portrays his protagonist Abramson as a sort of inquisitor, burning his Hebrew writings at the stake:

Abramson had a feeling that a planted tree was about to be uprooted inside him. For this has been his entire life for so many toilsome years. Would his heart bear it? Burning parchments and letters, burning parchments and letters ...

[...]

And upon their return home, Shmuel Davidovsky saw Yaakov Abramson taking the entire pile of his works and *throwing* it into the fire. Then he knew for certain that mysteries must have been revealed, and that danger must be faced.

“*The Revival of Hebrew Arts and Letters in Our Times*” – great clear-cut words, all broken-up and dispersed... the fire went up to consume them.¹⁴

Here Brenner quotes Hanina’s answer without mentioning him or referring to his martyrdom. In doing so Brenner converts the body into text: according to Brenner the real and only martyr is the text.

This trend towards representing the book as a martyr intensified with the rise of Nazi Germany in the early 1930s. In 1934 Bialik wrote a poem "איכה יירא את האש" (How Shall He Fear the Fire).¹⁵ Bialik wrote his poem at the invitation of the Tel Aviv municipality, on the occasion of the 1934 *Adloyada* Purim parade. The parade culminated in the burning of a huge dragon, in response to Nazi book-burning. In the second half of the poem Bialik speaks directly to the burning books, referring

to them as another link in the great chain of Jewish martyrology:

וגם אתם, ספרי ישראל, אלה מכם אשר נגנזו בתוך
גיליונותיהם ניצוץ אחד קדוש מן האש הגדולה,
אל נא תיראו איפוא גם הפעם מפני האש.
היא לא תשלוט בכם, גוילים נשרפים ואותיות
פורחות כציפורי אש. ממעל לכל גבולות עמים
וארצות, ואל כל ארבע כנפות הארץ. תעופפנה
אותיותיכם והעבירו את אש הקודש, נחלת אבותיכם
מעולם, מגוי אל גוי וממלכה אל ממלכה, ולא
תשקע האש ולא תכבה

And you too, Books of Israel, those of you who have hidden inside
their sheets a single divine spark of the great fire,
once again, then, do not fear the fire.
It shall not have reign over you, burning parchments and letters
soaring like fire birds.
Your letters shall fly over nations
and lands, towards every corner of the earth, and carry that holy fire ...

Avraham Shlonsky as well, following the events of *Kristallnacht*, ליל הבדולח, wrote his poem
"שאלו, שרופים באש" (Ask The Burnt), which again ignores the figure of R. Hanina and focuses only on
the burning parchments and flying letters turning into martyrs:

אך אמרו זאת חכמינו – כי ידענו זאת מקודם:
הגוילים כי ישרפו עוד תפרחנה אותיות...
הן פורחות כשרפי-קודש ורושמות בכתב של אודם:
"ארורה את יד בליעל שכבתה את האורות"

But our sages have thus spoken – for we knew it well beforehand:
When the parchments are all burning still the letters all take flight...
Like the Seraphs they are soaring and in bloody script they printed:
"Cursed is this hand, the wicked, that has snuffed out every light".¹⁶

In his essay on Kiddush Hashem in Hebrew literature, Avidov Lipsker argues that: "Kiddush

Hashem, which used to be a fundamental value since the Jews were persecuted in Maccabean days, has been reconstructed in modern Hebrew literature as an expression of decline and shame...”.¹⁷ And Dana Olmert, following Michael Gluzman who himself follows Daniel Boyarin, argues in her recent book that: “Zionism has provided young men with a new gender ideal, unlike the one that they saw reflected in traditional stories about *Kiddush Hashem*”.¹⁸ They all claim then that ancient and medieval Jewish literature provided a clear martyrological ideal of a frail, passive man, submitting to his persecutors and ready to die without a fight. On this view, Zionism has created an alternate, masculine ideal, and then made it into a theological ideal: it set front and center an active, combative masculinity, which stands in complete contradistinction to the very idea of martyrdom.

I think that the first part of this claim seems to be too sweeping as an argument about the entire span of Jewish history up until the rise of Zionism. As evident in the narrative traditions surrounding Haninah son of Teradion, as well as in several other stories about the ten martyrs, rabbinic literature does not portray a simple picture of passive martyrs dying in the name of God, rather the opposite. The sages portray an ambivalent attitude to the idea of passively dying in the name of God. Having said that, Lipsker, Olmert and others are not wrong in clamming that Zionist ideology has often (though not always) viewed martyrdom as a sign of weakness and passivity.

The story of Haninah son of Teradion and the way it has been re-presented in Modern Hebrew literature marks a possible resolution: substituting physical martyrdom with textual ones. It is not the Jewish man who is feeble and vulnerable, but rather the Jewish text; and this is what goes up in flames. This substitution of body and text emancipates the Jewish body of his weakness, allowing him to realize his new role as an active fighter.

Notes

- * This article is the result of a lecture given at the School of Theology, Doshisha University in 2019. I wish to thank the organizers of the conference, Prof. Ada Taggar Cohen, Dr. Doron B. Cohen and Prof. Yigal Schwartz for the invitation and to all the participants for their helpful remarks.
- 1 On the Ten Martyrs see Noa Walden, *Weeping in Rabbinic Literature: Cultural, Literary and Rhetorical Aspects*, Ph.D. Thesis (The Hebrew University 2019), 16 and the references in note 559.
- 2 For a comprehensive review on the question of “Parting of the ways” see for instance Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2004); Tobias Nicklas, *Jews and Christians?* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2014).
- 3 On this question see: Saul Lieberman, “The Martyrs of Caesrea”, *The Jewish Quarterly review*, Vol 36 (3) (Jan. 1946), 239-253; William Hugh Clifford Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Garden city, New York, 1967); Glen Warren Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge 1995); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the*

- Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999); Ra'anana Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2005; Noa Walden, *Ibid*, 186 – 187.
- 4 Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, Translated By Jane Marie Todd (Harvard University Press 2008), 68.
 - 5 “The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity”, in *The Book of Heaven: an Anthology of Writings from Ancient to Modern Times*, Edited by Carol Zaleski and Philip Zaleski (Oxford University Press 2000), 117.
 - 6 “Interestingly enough, a number of martyrological sources in the Babylonian Talmud not only continue to accord prominence to the theme of individual culpability, but even present the cruel fate of the martyrs as an entirely fitting punishment for their transgressions – rather than as a mark of their superhuman piety”. (Boustán, *Ibid*, p. 67).
 - 7 *Sifrei Devarim*, Chapter 32 (307).
 - 8 For detailed discussion in the story of Ben Teradion see Walden, *Ibid*, 186-199 and the references there.
 - 9 See for example Mishnah, Avot 6, 9; Bavli, Yevamot 96b; Bavli, Sanhedrin 98a.
 - 10 E.g., Bavli, Makot 11a.
 - 11 Bavli, Yevamot 96b.
 - 12 For other sources in which this phrase functions in similar way see: Bavli, Beitzah, 21a; Sanhedrin 68a; Eruvin 63a; PT, Yoma, Chapter 1:5 (7a); Sifrei Bamidbar, Chapter 28 (148). It should be noted that later texts (such as the *Midrash of the Ten Martyrs* and the *Eleh Ezkerah* liturgical poem) have been fully aware of the problematics of Jose ben Kisma's role in the text. Consequently, his character has been edited out of the story, which became a simpler martyr narrative where Haninah ben Teradion is executed on Roman orders.
 - 13 See Noa Walden, *Ibid*, 186-199.
 - 14 Joseph Chayim Brenner, *Around the Point*, (Kinnert, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir Publishing House: Or-Yehuda 2007), 273-274 [Heb.] Translation here by Yaniv Farkas.
 - 15 Haim Nahman Bialik, *The Complete Works of H. N. Bialik*, (Dvir: Tel-Aviv 1964), 391 [Heb.] Translation here by Yaniv Farkas.
 - 16 Avraham Shlonsky, *Poems*, vol.1-2 (Tel-Aviv 1961), 291. One more book that should be noted is Haim Be'er's *Upon a Certain Place* (לפני המקום) from 2007, in which there are many direct and indirect references to Hanina's famous answer, detached from the original Talmudic source thus portraying the burning Jewish books as the real martyrs alluding to their murdered Jewish readers.
 - 17 Avidov Lipsker, “Kidush ha-Shem in the Mirror of the Hebrew Literature: Ideological Crises or Continuation in ‘Kidush ha-Shem’ Stories”, in: Yigal Schwartz, Judith Bar-El and Tamar Hess [editors], *Literature and Society in Modern Hebrew Culture: Collected Research in Honor of Gershon Shaked*, (Hakibutz Hameuchad and Keter, Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem), 440 [Hebrew].
 - 18 Dana Olmert, *A Barricade of Mothers”: Mothers of Soldiers in Israeli Zionist Culture and Literature*, (Hakibutz Hameuchad: Tel-Aviv 2018), 39.