

Circumcision as Rebellion

By Ido Hevroni

Why Judaism rejected the decrees of Nature, Fortune, and Rome.

Circumcision is the first commandment given to the children of Abraham, and it is also the strangest. The Jewish obligation to injure the body of a newborn child has been a source of opprobrium from both Jews and Gentiles—not only in the modern world, which celebrates the rights of individuals to protect their bodies, but also in the ancient pagan world, which was well familiar with other blood-covenants. Yet despite the peculiarity of the practice and the at times virulent opposition to it, Jews have continued to observe it through the ages, even in communities that abandoned nearly all the other traditional practices. For this reason, circumcision has often been seen, and continues to be seen, as the most extreme example of the Jews' insistence on distinguishing themselves from other peoples. Circumcision, in other words, is seen as the most glaring case of Jewish particularism.

However, there is an ancient tradition, explained in a rabbinic legend called Midrash Tanhuma, that suggests the contrary: That the true meaning of circumcision is not about Jewish peoplehood at all, but rather about the correct relationship between man and his world; that it is, in other words, a commandment with universal implications.

The midrash presents this idea by way of a story that describes a confrontation between a Jew and a Gentile over the merits of circumcision. The Jew is R. Akiva, one of the most famous of the rabbinic sages and a proponent of the Jewish revolt against Rome in the second century c.e., known as the "Bar Kochba Revolt," which marked the final effort of the Jews to restore their sovereign life before the great exile. His adversary, called "Turanus Rufus," is the Roman governor of the province of Judea in the years leading up to the rebellion.

The idea expressed in the story comprises three levels. On the first level, that of the simple reading, the two leaders argue about circumcision and the correct relationship man should have with nature. On a second, deeper level, these two characters resonate within Jewish tradition to reveal a broader argument about fate and the willful actions of man. Finally, on the deepest level, there is revealed the underlying philosophical assumptions of both sides, upon which the debate truly rests.¹ It will become clear that this is neither a simple political struggle nor a discussion about a single commandment, but a genuine conflict of worldviews, and of the civilizations that emanate from them. Namely, Turanus Rufus venerates the classical Hellenist concepts of cosmos, mimesis, and tragedy, which together represent the limited sphere of man's existence.² R. Akiva's response, however, describes a Jewish alternative: Instead of a closed world ruled by the blind forces of nature, his is an image of man who alters, even creates, a world of his own.

That such a clash should express itself through an argument about circumcision should not surprise us. After all, it was the Hellenistic adoration of the body and concern for its completeness that lay at the heart of the decision to include circumcision among the imperial edicts forbidding castration. This, historians of the period

teach us, was probably the spark that ignited the rebellion in the fields of Judea.³ Despite the tragic consequences of the ban—Rome’s violent suppression of the Judean rebellion resulted in the deaths of thousands of Jews, and brought a millennium of Jewish national life in the land of Israel to an end—it is nonetheless important to understand that the prohibition was not merely the result of Roman cruelty. It stemmed, rather, from the principled refusal of educated Hellenists to tolerate the deliberate injury the Jews carried out on their bodies and those of their children. In their eyes, circumcision was no less than a Promethean defiance of the gods. The text reads as follows:

Turanus Rufus the wicked asked R. Akiva: “Whose works are superior? Those of the Holy One or those of flesh and blood?”

He replied: “Those of flesh and blood are superior.”

Turanus Rufus the wicked said to him: “Look at the heavens and the earth; can you make them?”

R. Akiva said to him: “Do not speak to me of that which is beyond human beings, who have no control over them; but speak about things which are to be found among men.”

[Turanus Rufus] said to him: “Why are you circumcised?”

He said to him: “I knew you were going to ask me that; therefore at the outset I told you that the works of flesh and blood are superior to those of the Holy One.”

R. Akiva brought him sheaves of wheat and white bread, and said to him: “These are the works of the Holy One, and these are the works of flesh and blood. Are the latter not superior?” He then brought him bundles of flax and garments from Beit She’an, and said to him: “These are the works of the Holy One, and these are made by man. Are the latter not superior?”

Turanus Rufus said to him: “If he [God] desires circumcision, why does a person not exit his mother’s womb circumcised?”

R. Akiva said to him: “And why does he exit with his umbilical cord attached? Does his mother not sever it?”

And why is he not born circumcised? Because the Holy One only gave us the commandments in order to refine us through them, and so said David, “[Every] word of God is refined.”⁴

To build his case against circumcision, Rufus challenges R. Akiva with what sounds like a trick question: Whose works are superior, God’s or man’s? His immediate intention is to challenge the rabbi on the specific commandment of circumcision. If God created the world, he would argue, how can you destroy God’s creation? When the rabbi replies to his question with the surprising answer that, in fact, *man’s* works are superior, the Roman attempts to push the rabbi’s logic ad absurdum: What of heaven and earth? he persists. Can man create works like them?

Here the rabbi shifts the focus of the debate by dividing the universe into two categories—that which is within human control, and that which is beyond it. Now, the discussion is no longer about man’s desire to breach the boundaries of the universe—which, as we know from the story of the Tower of Babel, carries with it tragic

consequences. Rather, R. Akiva concentrates on what can and should be done within the boundaries of human ability.

Shifting the debate in this way transforms it from a discussion about the cosmic and the transcendent to one about the meaning of human civilization. In the eyes of the Hellenist, there is nothing more exalted than that which nature has given us. To him, the supreme art is that of *mimesis*, or imitation of the natural world: When the philosopher wishes to extol a certain painter, he relates how birds would come to peck at the grapes on the canvas; so, too, does the athlete exhibit his naked body at the Gymnasium in the belief that his is the epitome of the natural form. To the Hellenist, clearly, bodily mutilation is unforgivable.

To justify his preference for man's works over God's, however, the rabbi offers the examples of wheat and flax, comparing each with its own man-made end product. Rufus, with his refined pagan tastes, is asked to choose: Wheat or bread? Flax or linen? The point of this exercise is clear: If nature really is superior to artifact, why eat bread when you can have wheat? Why choose fine clothes when you can protect yourself against the cold with flax? Clearly, any civilized person would prefer the products of industry to those of nature. Thus has R. Akiva undermined the entire structure of Rufus' naturalistic approach.

Nonetheless, this still does not completely answer the question bothering the pagan. R. Akiva's examples prove that man is not completely "natural," and that culture—that is, altering nature—has an important role to play in his life. Yet there is still a vast difference between circumcision, considered a violation of nature, and the improvements offered in the rabbi's presentation. So the governor persists with his argument: If God desires circumcision, why does a person not exit his mother's womb already circumcised? The rabbi's final answer explains that altering nature is not simply a cultural matter, but is rather a well-established phenomenon in the natural world, as well.

Indeed, the study of the natural world proves, if anything, that altering creation not only does *not* violate the laws of nature, but is in fact a basic obligation of existence, a critical element, perhaps, of nature itself. The severance of the umbilical cord, that first human intervention in the process of nature, is a requirement for life. And if nature itself is in need of intervention and alteration, circumcision cannot be conclusively dismissed as an act of damage. Indeed, it may even be seen as one of repair.

The concluding sentence of the story—a narrator’s note, which is not part of the preceding debate—helps to elucidate R. Akiva’s position. Like the rabbi, the narrator takes a universal cultural analogy and uses it to explain the Jewish worldview. The commandments in general, and the commandment of circumcision in particular, are likened here to the goldsmith’s task of “refining” gold. The word “to refine,” *l’tzoref*, is drawn from metallurgy. For just like gold—a material of no use for man’s survival, but nevertheless of great significance for human civilization—the commandments take their “raw material” from nature, and refine it through a lengthy process to the level of human concepts. Moreover, the similarity of the commandments to the goldsmith’s craft explains that the Jew, like the goldsmith, does not seek to breach the laws of nature; instead, he seeks to turn the world nature has given man into a more civilized, “human” place. In this instance, the raw material is the body; altering it, according to this explanation, is an act of fulfilling its human potential.

The rabbi’s final answer is met with silence. Could it be that Rufus was convinced? Read in isolation, as a debate among intellectuals lounging in the shade of the pillars of Caesarea’s *Cardo*, one could easily conclude that the rabbi won. Placed in a broader context, however, the discussion takes on a different cast. For these are not merely intellectuals who are speaking, but also political leaders engaged in historic battle. The debate may have taken place in Caesarea, but most definitely not in the royal colonnade; more likely, it took place in the dungeon beneath the ruler’s palace, where R. Akiva was being held prisoner. And from what we know of R. Akiva’s fate, Rufus’ silence should not be taken to mean capitulation. Indeed, this may very well have been their last exchange. As the Talmud tells us, Rufus was R. Akiva’s torturer, and possibly his executioner as well.⁵

Judea at this time was in turmoil. The Romans, normally tolerant occupiers, were deeply troubled by Jewish customs such as the Sabbath, Tora study, and *tefilin*, and outlawed their practice in any part of the Empire. Most offensive of all to the Romans, however, was circumcision. As governor of Judea, Rufus—whose given name was Tineius, not Turanus—took vigorous, cruel measures to make sure the Roman ban on circumcision was effected in full. R. Akiva, however, an outspoken critic of Rome, defied the edicts. He appears in rabbinic sources as one of the rebellion’s leading voices, possibly even its spiritual leader. Later sources even describe him as the “arms-bearer” for the leader of the revolt, Simon Bar Kosiba, better known as Bar Kochba.⁶ According to rabbinic sources, R. Akiva proclaimed Bar Kochba to be none other than the Messiah himself.⁷

What looks like a philosophical debate between two men, then, was really a life-and-death struggle for both a nation and a religion. Tineius’ critique of Jewish theology did not derive from mere curiosity; rather, it was the flashpoint in a clash of civilizations. The Jewish insistence on defacing the body was too much even for tolerant Rome to bear. The only solution, it seemed, was bloody conflict in Judea.

At this point, the concept of tragedy enters the picture. The Hellenistic adoration of nature was not limited to the dimension of space; it also applied to time. Not only was the material world perceived as existing in a static and predetermined system, but so was the fate of man, as well. History for the Greeks was shaped not by human beings, but by the Fates, mythological goddesses of destiny who were never to be disobeyed. For the cultured Hellenist, Prometheus and Oedipus served as cautionary tales: Respect Fortuna. Never rebel against the gods.

Thus R. Akiva and Tineius Rufus are not only representatives of conflicting worldviews, but also historical figures who fought on opposing sides of a battle that was first and foremost political and military. The controversy over the injury to the human body may well signal a debate over the very notion of fate and human history. Should an individual or a nation succumb to fate, or fight against it? Should one accept Roman rule, or rebel? The arguments of the Roman ruler carry a powerful resonance. To the Judean rebels he asks: Do you not accept the authority of heaven? Do you not recognize—stiff-necked people that you are—that the desire of your own God is that you submit to the power of the mighty Roman Empire?

Rufus was not the only historical figure to ask this question. Many Jews at the time reconciled themselves to Roman rule, and justified their acceptance with similar arguments. The ideas of one of them—first a Jewish general, and later a Roman historian—are preserved in his writings. The views of the second, a rabbinic sage, appear in the Babylonian Talmud.

The first was Josephus Flavius, who participated in, and later wrote about, the Great Revolt of 66-72 C.E., the first of a series of Judean rebellions against Rome half a century prior to the Bar Kochba rebellion and the setting for R. Akiva's debate. Josephus justifies his surrender to the Romans after the fall of Jodefat as follows:

He put up a secret prayer to God and said: "Since it pleases you, who have created the Jewish nation, to depress the same, and since all their good fortune (*tyche*) is gone over to the Romans, and since you have made choice of this soul of mine to foretell what is to come to pass hereafter, I willingly give them my hands, and am content to live. And I protest openly that I do not go over to the Romans as a deserter of the Jews, but as a minister from you."⁸

Here Josephus rationalizes not only his resignation to Roman dominion, but also his defection—under the direction of Tyche, goddess of fortune—to the side of the conquerors. His petition to God and the justification of his decree show that he perceives it to be part of God's own revelation in the world.

The second case is that of R. Yose ben Kisma, a contemporary of R. Akiva who was friendly with the Roman administration and opposed the rebellion.

When R. Yose ben Kisma fell ill, R. Hanina ben Teradyon went to visit him. He said to him: "Hanina, my brother, do you not know that this nation [i.e., Rome] was assigned sovereignty from Heaven? For it has destroyed his house [i.e., the Temple of Jerusalem] and burned his hall, and has murdered his righteous, and has slain his finest, yet still it continues to survive. Yet I hear that you sit and study Tora and a scroll lies in your lap?" He replied to him: "May mercy come from Heaven."

[R. Yose ben Kisma] said to him: "I speak to you reasonably, and you tell me, 'May mercy come from Heaven!' I will be surprised if they do not burn you and your Tora scroll in fire."⁹

R. Yose is a kind of Jewish seer; in a number of other talmudic tales, he is depicted as foretelling the future.¹⁰ In our story, his prophecy is fulfilled all too quickly: Soon after his discussion with R. Hanina, he is arrested by the authorities and burned alive, his body wrapped in a Tora scroll. His ability to prognosticate positions him close to the determinist view—that is, when all is foretold, the only thing left is for one to adjust oneself to the movement of the world, not to resist it.

R. Akiva's view must thus be seen against the backdrop of the historical fatalism of Josephus and R. Yosse ben Kisma. His support for the rebellion is not only a political matter; it is a theological pronouncement. Just as circumcision reflects the assertion that not everything that nature gives us should be accepted without correction, so too does it make the point that not every ruler imposed upon us by history must be accepted without struggle. Man is not the product of circumstance. Rather, he fashions history through his willful acts.¹¹

For the rabbis of the Talmud, events such as the clash between Rome and Judea carried conceptual and religious weight. Just as this debate is representative of the broader clash between Judea and Rome, for example, so too was the war itself symbolic of a deeper conflict: A cosmic struggle between the archetypes of Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca described in the book of Genesis.

Scratch the surface of our text, and Jacob and Esau appear. Both R. Akiva and Rufus are historical figures, but their names and actions provide an additional, archetypal dimension which was clear to the authors of our text. The representative of Rome bore the name "Rufus," in Latin "the Red," probably because of the color of his hair. In the world of midrashic association, this suffices to relate him to the redheaded Esau, spiritual father of the Edomites, who are said to be the forebears of Rome. The corruption of his first name to "Turanus," or *tyrannus*, Latin for "tyrant" or "wicked one," seems to be derived from the rabbinic desire to reinforce the symbolic connection between the brutal governor and the wicked Esau.¹²

The name Akiva, of course, is an Aramaic variant of the Hebrew Ya'akov, or Jacob.¹³ Furthermore, it is none other than R. Akiva himself who was the first one to identify the war against Rome with the epic struggle between Jacob and Esau.¹⁴ To understand the deeper intentions behind our text, then, will require a look at the original, primordial struggle in the book of Genesis, for only there will we find the keys to understanding the deepest resonances of our tale.

Jacob and Esau are twins, but far from identical. Even before they are born, they are locked in a struggle so intense as to cause Rebecca to inquire of God. She is told that the conflict between her sons is the beginning of a titanic struggle that will sweep through the generations of human history:

And Isaac pleaded with the Eternal on behalf of his wife, for she was barren, and the Eternal granted his plea, and Rebecca his wife conceived. And the sons clashed together within her, and she said, "If it be so, then why is it I?" And she went to inquire of the Eternal. And the Eternal said to her: "Two nations are in your womb; two peoples from your loins shall issue. One nation shall prevail over the other; the older shall serve the younger."

And when her time was come to give birth, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first one came out ruddy, like a hairy mantle all over, and they called his name Esau. Then his brother came out, his hand grasping Esau's heel, and he called his name Jacob. And Isaac was sixty years old when they were born. And the lads grew up, and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple man, a dweller in tents.¹⁵

From the very beginning, the portraits of the two brothers are drawn in sharp, irreconcilable tones. The origins of the conflict are prenatal, hidden from view. As they grow, however, they take on the qualities predicted by their appearance at birth: The hairy, animal-like Esau becomes a hunter; the smoother Jacob a "dweller in tents."

The hunter imitates his natural surroundings. Like an animal, he lives in the field, following the laws that govern the state of nature. Like a predator, the hunter does not nurture or develop his prey: He finds it as it appears, and he seizes it. The hunter makes no attempt to change nature and to adjust it to his will, but instead adjusts himself—to whatever degree his human limitations allow—to the demands that nature makes of him.

By contrast, Jacob the tent-dweller has chosen the pastoral ways of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. Like them, Jacob engages in shepherding and farming, signifying the passage from a culture of hunters and gatherers—a culture that accepts the natural system and makes no attempt to alter it—to a culture of raising flocks and crops, a modification of nature that is, in the anthropological view, the beginning of all civilization. The shepherd intervenes; he does not accept nature as static and immutable. Instead, he discovers that artifice is much more profitable: When Jacob comes to an agreement with his father-in-law Laban as to his wages, for example, he intervenes in the rutting process of the sheep to maximize his gain. In Jacob and Esau, then, the Bible gives us the primary contrast between natural man, who sees himself as an animal of the field, and civilized man, who conceives his status as different from all other creatures in the animal world.

All this comes to a head in the story of the birthright. The very notion of a birthright—a special inheritance given to the firstborn irrespective of his merits, achievements, or virtues—exemplifies the natural system. At the moment of birth, Jacob, who has lost this natural advantage by only a few minutes, grabs the heel of his brother Esau in a clear declaration of intent. He is determined to overcome, rather than accept, the deficiencies of nature. Jacob, we realize, is someone who orders reality, someone who—through human aspiration, not predetermination—repairs that which is deficient. So it is with the struggle against his brother, and so, too, with a father-in-law who, himself acceding to the laws dictated by nature, switched his younger daughter Rachel for the elder Leah on Jacob's wedding night, justifying the act in the name of immutable principles of nature that govern the proper order of human relations.

The birthright episode thus brings to full expression the difference in the characters of the two brothers, closing a circle that began with their birth. In the end, through the force of his will, the younger brother's declaration of intent is realized. The birthright is his, and his brother, the animal-like hunter, falls into a trap of his own making:

And Jacob prepared a pottage, and Esau came from the field, and he was fatigued. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me swallow some of that red, red, for I am fatigued." Therefore is his name called Edom ("red"). And Jacob said, "Sell now your birthright to me." And Esau said, "Behold, I am at the point of death; what use have I for a birthright?" And Jacob said, "Swear to me now." And he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil pottage, and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off, and Esau despised the birthright.¹⁶

Esau's behavior, both in action and in speech, reminds us of the animal-like life he has come to lead. We see nothing genuinely human in him: He is fatigued, he is famished, he eats, he drinks, he leaves. Neither do his words elevate him to the level of man: He asks for food by saying, "Let me swallow," *hal'iteni*, a term usually connoting the feeding of animals. Whereas the narrative describes the food as "pottage," Esau sees only his favorite color, red, the color of life's essence, the color of the raw animal flesh that is his daily prize. He is no man, but a beast of prey.

Jacob, on the other hand, represents the opposite qualities. His actions and words are examples of intervention and artifice: He cooks his food, which animals do not. Moreover, though the pottage is seemingly meant for himself, he decides to delay satisfaction for the sake of something more distant and abstract: The birthright. He manipulates his brother in order to achieve his will, and gains the birthright through the power of human agreement—the barter, a human activity without parallel in the animal kingdom. Jacob then anchors the purchase in an oath, a human act even more abstract than barter. For whereas in barter the act

is tangible, and its consequences material, through an oath man binds himself with invisible chains to something inaccessible through nature.

Esau's behavior in this chapter, however consistent with earlier descriptions, nonetheless raises a question: How could the hunter not have controlled his desire? Is not every hunter a master of self-control? His life in the cruel world of nature teaches him to track his prey for days, to wait long hours patiently as he hides in the thorny brush, straining his capacities even when it seems that there is no further hope. Why, then, can he not resist his hunger now? The answer is revealed in the closing verse of the episode. In the sole description of Esau's inner world, we find him despising the birthright. In his inner world, there is no importance attached even to those cultural definitions which grant human preference on the basis of natural facts. In the eyes of natural man, whatever is not utterly natural is abominable. Deferral of gratification will only be considered in light of immediate, physical profit: One may be patient to kill one's prey, but not starve for the sake of an abstract hybrid of artifice. In the field, he may control his impulse for the sake of survival; upon arriving home, however, he feels no need to rule over his impulses. He gives them free rein.

The identification of Tineius Rufus with his ruddy predecessor Esau, and of R. Akiva with his namesake Jacob, brings the meaning of our text into clearer relief. A debate over circumcision, it seems, is nothing less than a symbolic clash, not only of two nations at war, but of two conflicting approaches to civilization. On the one side is the worship of nature, a theme that resonates not only in Hellenistic thought, but in both Eastern and Western philosophy down through our own day. The political dimensions of this approach justify the rule of the oppressor as the expression of nature and divine right; as a spiritual and moral doctrine, it encourages man to be passive, deters innovation and self-assertion, and focuses its rage on anyone who would rise up against the foreordained order of things.

On the other side, we find a position represented throughout the Hebraic tradition, from Genesis to the prophets to the rabbinic tradition. This position is unwilling to accept the world as it is, and is therefore characterized by a restless, uncompromising desire for improvement. This view takes on symbolic application with the severance of the foreskin, the marking of the most impulsive organ of the human body with an open and blunt statement: Man is not an animal. Man shares with God the ability to stand outside of and apart from nature. Man is a creation whose horizon of aspirations lies far beyond the satisfaction of his natural impulses. Man wants to change, even to create, the world.

Although the Judean rebellion was crushed, Judaism was not. Refusing to bend to the decrees of nature and fate, the Jewish leadership refashioned even its own religion into something that could survive in conditions of exile. With the final suppression of the rebellion in 135 C.E., rabbinic Judaism abandoned hope for the immediate re-establishment of the Jewish commonwealth, and began a life as a people in exile, in a state of permanent—moral and spiritual, if not military—rebellion against nations that saw themselves as representative of nature, fate, and divine law.

In time, much of Western thought eventually accepted the Hebraic approach over the Hellenistic submission to the edicts of nature. Indeed, Western democracy owes much of its moral vibrancy to the belief that every individual has the power to repudiate destiny, to fashion his own fate and that of his people, and to flout the edicts of the gods. For the Jews, it was the spirit of rebellion and change, preserved across the span of history, that enabled them later to return to their homeland and rebuild the Jewish state, defying the "gods" that had declared their people a relic, and their fate one of wandering the world in infamy. Judea may have

fallen to Rome, but the legacy of R. Akiva continues to leave its mark throughout the world.

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Notes

1. The decision to read this story as a literary creation and not as a historical record is based on the prevalent modern approach to the literature of the sages, which views stories from the Midrash and Talmud as tools for providing insight into a larger world of ideas, ones often at variance with historical writings. See, for example, Jonah Frankel, *Ways of the Agada and Midrash*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Yad Lataalmud, 1991), pp. 235-238 [Hebrew]. Apart from this, in the present case there are two specific factors that support the opinion that a description of the history of the time was not uppermost in the writer's mind: One, the fact that the story first appears in its present form in the Midrash Tanhuma, whereas in the earlier Midrash Genesis Rabba (11:6, Theodor-Albeck pp. 94-95), there is a similar story in which the protagonists are R. Hoshaya and an anonymous philosopher, an indication of a deliberate adaptation that prefers the well-known figures of R. Akiva and Turanus Rufus to the much lesser-known characters of the original story. Two, the attitude depicted in the story of the Roman governor is far more Greek than Roman (which is understandable in view of the previous assumption, according to which the story was taken from an ancient source in which the hero was a Greek philosopher). Thus the fragility of the story as an historical source reinforces its status as a literary creation. Indeed, the decision to read this story as "literature" is crucial: Whereas a historical reading will try to extract as much objective information as possible about the events of the specific period in which the protagonists lived, a literary reading will strive to reveal the meta-historical truths that the narrator tried to convey. Or, whereas the historian's gaze is directed from the text to the reality it represents, the literary critic looks inward, at the meaning concealed in the text. On this distinction between the historical and the poetical, see also Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 16-17.

2. I intentionally employ the term "Hellenist" because the view placed in the ruler's mouth is not a typically Roman one. Rather, it is a general description of the Hellenistic spirit as understood by the authors of the story. See the following note.

3. See the essays by Moshe David Herr, "Reasons for the Bar Kochba Revolt," in Aharon Oppenheimer, ed., *The Bar Kochba Revolt* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1980), pp. 57-67 [Hebrew]; and Alfredo Mordechai Rabello, "The Edicts on Circumcision as a Factor in the Bar Kochba Revolt," in Aharon Oppenheimer and Uriel Rappaport, eds., *The Bar Kochba Revolt: A New Approach* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1984), pp. 27-46 [Hebrew].

4. Midrash Tanhuma, Tazria 7 (Buber's edition, p. 18).

5. Jerusalem Brachot 9:5.

6. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Kings and Wars 11:3.

7. Jerusalem Ta'anit 4:6; Lamentations Rabba 2:4.

William Whiston, trans., *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1999), p. 794.

8. Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*, book 3, ch. 8, in

9. Avoda Zara 18a.

10. See, for example, Yevamot 96b, Sanhedrin 98a.

11. This idea is, apparently, what leads R. Akiva to identify Bar Kochba—who was a political leader and not a religious figure, and, moreover, openly denied God’s authority—as the Messiah. The sources (note 7 above) describe Bar Kochba’s speech on the eve of battle, in which he makes a short appeal to God: “Don’t help and don’t interfere.” In light of the sources we have cited, the extreme nature of this appeal can be explained as Bar Kochba’s attempt to distance his fighters from fatalistic notions, and encourage them to believe in themselves and their ability to change their own destiny. In this light, the full force of R. Akiva’s view of Messianism as a clear political, human act is revealed.

12. On the connection between “Turanus” and “Tyrannus,” see Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1, trans. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), p. 549; Joseph Derenbourg, *Essays on the History and the Geography of Palestine* (Hildesheim: H.A. Gerstenberg, 1975), p. 419 [French]; Jacob Levy, *The Dictionary of Talmud and Midrash* (Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1924), s.v. *turanus* [German].

13. The identification of R. Akiva with the patriarch Jacob receives additional support from another source: R. Akiva is the only talmudic sage known to have been a shepherd—Jacob’s profession—and his love for his wife Rachel, as with the case of Jacob and his Rachel, is strongly objected to by her father. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), pp. 151-153.

14. See Gershon D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1967), pp. 21-23.

15. Genesis 25:21-27.

16. Genesis 25:29-34.