

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gevas to Antiparas, and they all died during one period, because they did not treat one another with respect...they all died between Pesach and Shavuos...they all died of askara (the croup). (Yevamos 62b)

In the Parsha Pearls two years ago, we wrote about this Gemara, which states that Rabbi Akiva's disciples died from a disease. We mentioned that Zionist authors, as well as heretical Jewish historians before the era of Zionism, invented the story that they died fighting in the revolt against Rome led by Ben Koziva. Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac Halevy showed that these claims have no historical basis, in Chazal or elsewhere (Doros Harishonim v. 4 chapters 39-41). The Talmud Yerushalmi (Taanis 24a) says only that Rabbi Akiva thought that Ben Koziva was moshiach. We followed with several pages of material about Ben Koziva and the controversy surrounding him.

Since then, our readers have raised many good questions on the subject of Ben Koziva, and we will devote this week's issue to answering two of those questions.

Question: Don't the Zionists have proof from the words of the Gaonim to say that Rabbi Akiva's disciples died in Ben Koziva's revolt?

Answer: The only "proof" they have come up with is a line from the Igeres Rav Sherira Gaon, which reads: "And Rabbi Akiva raised up many disciples, and there was a destruction ("shmada") on the disciples of Rabbi Akiva." The Zionist writer Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz says in his commentary on the Talmud that this might be a reference to the war of Ben Koziva. However, the Doros Harishonim rules out this possibility due to the fact that Rav Sherira Gaon ends off with the words, "as it states in Yevamos." Thus it is clear that Rav Sherira Gaon merely meant to quote from Yevamos, where it is written that the cause of death was a plague of croup;

his word "destruction" must be a reference to that plague.

The Doros Harishonim also says that all of the 24,000 disciples learned under Rabbi Akiva before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. He proves this from Kesubos 63a, which relates that Rabbi Akiva came home to his wife with all the disciples and his father-in-law, Kalba Savua, annulled his vow and gave him half of his property. Since Kalba Savua died in the destruction of Jerusalem, this incident must have taken place before the destruction. If so, it cannot be that these disciples were soldiers 50 or 60 years later in Ben Koziva's army.

In any case, this entire discussion is irrelevant to the issue of Zionism. Whether Rabbi Akiva actually sent his disciples into battle, or whether he merely supported Ben Koziva's revolt as the Yerushalmi says, we still have to explain why this revolt did not violate the Three Oaths. And the answer we gave was that Rabbi Akiva and the Jews of his time were following someone who had the criteria to be moshiach, unlike today's Zionists, who go to battle in the absence of anyone with the criteria to be, or even claiming to be, moshiach.

Question: You wrote: "Moshiach need only be someone who 'learns Torah and does mitzvos and forces the entire Jewish people to follow the Torah' (Rambam Melachim 11:4). Ben Koziva evidently met these criteria, so Rabbi Akiva rightly assumed that he was moshiach, and there was no prohibition on following him into battle. However, to follow a false moshiach who does not succeed in getting everyone to keep the Torah, and certainly to follow someone who does not even claim to be moshiach, is a transgression of the

oaths according to all opinions." But doesn't the Rambam also say that moshiach must "fight the wars of Hashem"? If someone cannot be assumed to be moshiach until he leads a war, then how could it be forbidden for someone who has not yet established himself as moshiach to fight a war? How will he ever get off the ground?

Answer: The Rambam's criteria for moshiach are to be read in order, and only after fulfilling each level can the messianic candidate go on to fulfill the next. Thus, if he is someone who "learns Torah and does mitzvos and forces the entire Jewish people to follow the Torah", then he is assumed to be moshiach with enough certainty that he may continue on to "fight the wars of Hashem". Once he fulfills the condition of fighting the wars of Hashem, he may continue on to the next stage mentioned by the Rambam: building the Temple and gathering in the exiles.

It is also worth noting that according to the Chofetz Chaim, there is one kind of war that is permitted even during exile: a war against a decree of shmad, a decree made by a government that forces Jews to give up their Torah observance. The classic case of a war against a decree of shmad was the Hasmonean war against Antiochus, which we commemorate on Chanukah. This war took place during the Temple era; nevertheless the Chofetz Chaim said that such a war would be permitted even today, when the oaths are in force, against an empire that outlaws the Torah, such as Communist Russia. (Recorded by Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman in his article "Omer Ani Maasai Lamelech" section 9.)

According to this, there would be a way for a messianic candidate to fulfill this condition of fighting a war even before he has completely established himself as moshiach: he could fight a war against a decree of shmad.

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