Rabbi Aqiba, the fox, and the fish

Yesterday we explained that in the year 130 of the common era, 60 years after the destruction of the Second Bet haMiqdash, the terrible decrees of Emperor Hadrian began, and the people of Yehuda (Judea, the central part of Israel, which excludes the northern part, the Galil) planned an organized rebellion against the Roman Empire. This rebellion was extremely risky. Since in Yehuda there were more than 10,000 Roman soldiers, armed to the teeth, apart from the auxiliary forces. And at a short distance from Yehuda (Syria, Egypt) the Emperor had more military reinforcements, ready to come and fight if necessary. These were professional soldiers with a lot of training, and ready to kill men, women and children, without mercy.

For the Yehudim, Hadrian's prohibition to observe the Tora left them with no alternative but to risk confronting military the mighty Empire. But not everyone agreed that we had to fight to preserve our faith. In those times, like today, there were Jews who did not mind living as Romans. And they criticized the Jews who were willing to risking their lives and the lives of their families to the defend our right to obey the Tora.

There was a famous discussion that took place on this subject, which has as its protagonist no other than Ribbi Aqiba, probably the most important rabbi of the entire Talmudic period. This story happened during the years 134 o 135. Ribbi Aqiba was born in the year 50, and was sentenced to death, tortured and executed in Caesarea by the Romans in the year 135. Why? Because he challenged the roman ban to study and teaching Tora in public.

The Gemara tells that an assimilated Jew named Papus found Ribbi Aqiba teaching Torah and he said: "Aquiba, are not you

afraid that the Romans will catch you and sentence you to death for occupying yourself with the Tora? Ribbi Aqiba answered him with a parable: “Once, a fox was walking near a river, and he saw the fish running from one side to the other, fleeing from some danger. ‘What are you running from?’ Asked the fox. And the fish responded ‘From the fishermen’s networks’. The cunning fox then said to them: ‘Why do not you come up to the surface, where you will be safe from the fishermen’s nets, and you will be able to live together with me, in peace and harmony?’ The fish answered ‘Are you really the most intelligent of the animals? If in the water, in our natural habitat, we fear for our lives, and we are constantly running to escape danger, on the surface, outside of the water, our death would be imminent!’ Ribbi Aqiba explained to Papus the parable: “The situation that we Jews are facing right now is similar to that of the fish. While we continue to practice our Tora, although we are in great danger, we are still in the water. And although is true that in the water we are exposed to being caught and killed, if we abandon the Tora and we voluntarily leave the water as the fox(= the Romans) suggested, for how long do you think we will survive? Outside the river, our death will be inevitable. For us, leaving the water is suicide. ”

With his beautiful parable Rabbi Aqiba articulated the profound reason for rejecting the decrees of Hadrian. And his words and example inspired, not only the Jews of his time, but millions of Jews throughout history, who understood that the Tora is for us what water is for the fish.

It is not surprising then that Rabbi Aqiba fully supported the cause of Bar Kokhba, since he himself risked – and sacrificed – his life for the sake of not abandoning our Tora. Moreover, Rabbi Aqiba considered that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah who would save Israel from the oppressor; liberate Jerusalem and rebuild the Beth haMiqdash… but all this did not happen. And in Tisha B’Ab we remember the falling of Betar, which was the

last battle of the Bar Kokhba rebellion.

The brave soldiers of Bar Kokhba, inspired by the same cause as Ribbi Aqiba fought to the end for three and a half years against the most powerful and cruel empire known to human history. At the beginning, when the Jewish rebellion began (132) Bar Kokhba's men triumphed in virtually every battle they fought. And like their ancestors 65 years ago (see https://halakhaoftheday.org/2017/07/26/judea-free-from-rome-years-66-68-of-the-common-era/) they declared an independent Jewish State.

The most symbolic act of Israel's independence was the minting of new "Jewish" coins to replace Roman coins with the image of Hadrian. Thousands of those coins have been found so far. On one side of the coin it said: "Shimon [Bar Kokhba] leader of Israel", and on the other side, as we can see in this image, it reads in ancient Hebrew, "for the freedom of Jerusalem," which was the ultimate goal of the rebellion.



To be continued….