The Sages’ Reaction to Antisemitism in the Hellenistic-Roman World

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1. Antisemitism in the Roman Empire

In the Midrash we find the following story:

Said R. Pinhas: Two women prostitutes were quarreling with each other in Ashkelon. Said the one to the other: “If you do not leave here, for you look Jewish – I do not forgive or pardon you.” After a while they became friendly again. Said the second to the first: “I forgive and pardon you for everything, but not for saying to me that I look Jewish.”

The instructive barb in this account is that it does not specify that it was indeed a Jewess – it may well have been a Gentile woman – who was insulted by the defamation that she looks Jewish. However, there are many proofs that “Jew” was an insulting term in the Roman Empire. One such will suffice here – the refusal of Vespasian and Titus to accept the honorific title of “Judaeus” after having suppressed the great revolt and their victory in Judaea. For, unlike other titles such as “Africanus,” “Asiaticus,” “Britannicus,” or “Germanicus,” one who accepted that title was likely to be considered a Judaizer, with all of the negative connotations attached to it. Hence, we understand this to mean that “Jew(ess)” was an opprobrious epithet in the Roman Empire.

The Jews in the Roman Empire knew well what their Gentile contemporaries thought of them. For that, they did not need to read the writings of the Greek Jew-haters (in Alexandria or Syria) or of the Roman ones. They could hear and register these things from the lips of any Gentile in the cities of the Land of Israel with mixed populations and, all the more so, from the Gentiles outside it. If they chanced to go into the theatres and circuses, they could see plays there, whose whole point was antisemitism. Therefore, in the literature of the Sages
not only echoes of what was being said by the antisemites but even excellent imitations—both in form and content—at their writings. Proof of this is in the exقسم of hatred in the Targum Sheni (lit. "Second Translation") to the Book of Esther (3:8), a sort of composition in itself—a monograph on the Jewish religion and the history of Israel—a carefully contrived collection of falsehoods and half-truths for defamatory purposes.  

A characteristic example of the polemic between the Jew-haters and the Jews can be found in the following dialogue:  

A certain heretic said to Rabbi Judah the Prince: "We are better than you. Of you it is written—"for Josiah and all Israel remained there for six months, until he had cut off every male in Edom" whereas you have been with us many years yet we have not done anything to you." He answered: "If you please, a student will join you (and give you the answer)." He was joined by R. Oshaya who said to him: "Because you do not know how to act—
you would like to kill them all, but you don't rule over them; should you kill those you rule, you will be called a truncated kingdom." Replied the here-
tic: "By the Agape of Rome! With this (care) we lie down and with this we get up."  

This is a reply to the Gentile's charge: that the Jews hate the human race— which exposed the truth. The Gentile admits that the Jews do not plan
to eradicate humankind but that it is the Gentiles, the Romans, who plan to destroy the Jewish people, and it is this thought which gives them sleepless
nights.  

The Sages were well aware of the real reasons for the hatred of Israel, including the charge that the Jews hate humankind; thus they relate:  

It is like the king who married a matron. Said he to her: "Do not speak to your (former) companions; neither borrow from them nor lend to them." Once, the king became angry with her and drove her from the palace. She went to all of her neighbours but they would not have her. ([So she
turned to the palace and] the king said to her: "You have acted impudently (by coming back!)") Replied she to him: "You are the one who caused this by saying: 'Do not borrow anything from your neighbours nor lend any-
thing to them.' Had I lent to them and borrowed from them, one of them would have seen me in the house and (then) would not have received me!" . . . Said Israel to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Did you not cause this by telling us: neither shalt thou make marriages with them: thy daughter shalt not give unto his son, nor shalt thou take his daughter unto thy son? . . . If we married our daughters to their sons or their daughters to our sons, one of them would see our daughter (in his home) or one of us would see our daughter in his home, would he not accept her?! . . . Hence, 'For Thou hast done it.'"  

Tacitus had previously described the Jews in the following words: "sed adversus omnes alios hostile odio. Separati epulis, discreti cubilibus, proiectis-
sinua ad libidinem gens; consubitus alienarum oblitinent; inter se nihil illicitum (but toward every other people they feel only hatred and enmity. They sit apart at meals, and they sleep apart, and although as a race they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves no-
thing is unlawful.)"  

The Jews' separation and isolation from the gentiles in dining and drinking and especially in marriage was, for many of the latter, a primary factor in accus-
ing the Jews of being misanthropic. Thus the Sages concluded: "Do not the
genile nations go into exile?! (Certainly.) But even so, for them it is no real exile; but for Israel it is. The exile of the gentle nations, who eat their bread and drink their wine, is not real exile; but for Israel, who do not partake of their bread nor drink of their wine, theirs is real exile."  

2. Reaction of the Sages  

The Sages' response to antisemitism was not uniform. Different Sages reacted in different ways and, on occasion, the very same Sage changed his st
ance—all according to the subject and the circumstances.  

The reactions were most varied. For example, we find in the Midrash: "R. Samuel b. Nahman said: 'None of the nations should really have scabs. Why then are there such among them? So that they should not taunt Israel and say to them, Are you not a nation of lepers?'" Here we have a specific response to the prevalent charge that the Jews were afflicted with leprosy.  

Quite often we have hostile words directed at the Gentiles and their ways as compared to those of the Jews: "The power which Thou grantest us is not the same as that which Thou grantest them, for when Thou grantest us power, we deal with them mercifully; but when Thou grantest them power, they treat us ruthlessly." The Sages expand on this: that the nations of the world do not have civilized laws and are steeped in murder, incest, adultery, lewdness, plunder and theft, and other abominations. These, of course, are precisely the charges the Greeks and Romans levied against the Jews. Is there no direct connection between these things or are the claims of the Jews only in reaction to the accusations of the antisemites? Thus, for example, Be-
rence is said to have had relations with her brother, Agrippa II. Both the Jewish-Hellenistic literature, which detailed the sins of the Gentiles in general and those of the Romans in particular, and the literature of the Sages, reacted to this. Thus, for example, R. Nehemiah said: "This is the wicked Titus, son of the wife of Vespasian..." And thus we find: "R. Judah said in the name of Samuel in the name of R. Hanina: 'I saw a gentle buy a goose at the market, use it immorally, and then strangle it, roast and eat it.'" And it was said of the Gentiles that "they prefer the cattle of Israelites to their own wives." And "R. Abba said: 'I saw a gentle bind his father and place him before his dog..."
who ate him." 29 And the Sages fixed the rule of law that "a gentile has no (legal) father" 30 because the law of matrimony does not apply to a Gentile. 31 And even when they seemed to praise the Gentiles, they did not call them as addicted to pederasty. 32 Therefore they ruled:

Cattle may not be left in the inns of the gentiles since they are suspected of bestiality; nor may a woman remain alone with them since they are suspected of lewdness; nor may a man remain alone with them since they are suspected of shedding blood. The daughter of an Israelite may not assist a gentlewoman in childbirth since she would be assisting to bring birth to a child for idolatry; but a gentle woman may assist the daughter of an Israelite. The daughter of an Israelite may not suckle the child of a gentle woman; but a gentle woman may suckle the child of the daughter of an Israelite in this one's domain. (An Israelite) may accept healing from them for his beasts but not for his person, and in no case may he have his hair cut by them. So R. Meir. But the Sages say: In the public domain it is permitted, but not if they are alone. 33

Similarly there is a parallel text:

Cattle may not be left in the inns of the gentiles, even males near males or females near females, because the male draws the male and the female draws the female; nor, needless to say, males near females or females near males. Cattle may not be committed to a headdress of an Israelite nor does one commit a child to him for instruction or to learn a craft or to remain alone with him. A daughter of an Israelite may not suckle the child of a gentle woman since she is raising a child for idolatry, but a gentle woman may suckle the child of an Israelite daughter in the latter's domain; a daughter of an Israelite may not assist a gentle woman in childbirth because she would be assisting in bringing to birth a child for idolatry; nor may a gentle woman assist an Israelite daughter in childbirth because they are suspected of murder. So R. Meir. But the Sages say: a gentle woman may assist an Israelite daughter in childbirth when others are standing by; if the two are alone, it is forbidden because they are suspected of murder. (An Israelite) may accept healing for his beasts but not for his person. A gentle woman may not cut up an embryo in its mother's womb nor give her a cup of root-water (to cause barrenness) because they are suspected of murder. Nor may an Israelite remain alone with a gentle in the bathhouse or urinal. If an Israelite chances to travel with a gentle, he should keep the gentle on his right, not on his left; R. Jacob ben Beroka, the son of R. Jochanan b. Beroka, says: with a sword in his right hand; a walking-stick in his left. If the two are ascending or descending a slope, the Israelite ascends (first) and the gentle descends (first); nor should (the Israelite) bend down in front of (the gentle) lest (the gentle) bash his skull; and (the Israelite) should mention a much longer journey, if (the gentile) asks his destination–he should reply evasively, as Jacob did to Esau, "until I come unto my lord unto Seir" and went on his way to Succoth. An Israelite having his hair cut by a gentle should be looking in the mirror. 34

Also:

An Israelite circumcises a gentile for proselytization but a gentile may not circumcise an Israelite, because they are suspected of murder. So R. Meir. But the Sages say: a non-Jew may circumcise an Israelite when others are present nearby. If the two are alone it is forbidden, because they are suspected of murder. 35

All of these laws date from the mid-second century C.E., that is, from the generation after the suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt and Hadrian's persecutory decrees. There is a connection.

3. A Change in Concepts

A further question is whether other laws which discriminated against the non-Jews also stem originally from a reaction of this kind or do they perhaps really represent an imminent, internal development? 37 It is clear that the turning point which led to the change of law in this regard was based upon the desire to prevent an even more serious reaction by the non-Jews when they became aware of these things, as is related explicitly in the account of the two commissioners whom the Government of Rome sent to the House of Study. 38 This turnabout was expressed in a series of laws. 39 Almost all of the Sages who forbid robbery from a non-Jew, and even more, retaining the last article of a non-Jew, do so because of desecration of the Name (of God) or, phrased differently, for the sanctification of the Name. 40 Similarly, they issued many regulations against discrimination between Israelites and non-Jews "for the sake of peace." 41 A town in which Israelites and gentiles live—the administrators collect from both for the sake of peace. One supports poor gentiles with poor Israelites for the sake of peace. One delivers funeral orations for, and buries dead gentiles for the sake of peace. One consoles gentle mourners for the sake of peace. Thus they ruled: "Whosoever sees a (foul) ass of a gentle must deal with it as he would were it of an Israelite." 42 Moreover, the absolutely opposite phenomenon existed alongside antisemitism in the ancient world—a great regard for Jews and Judaism and a flourishing, growing movement of conversion to Judaism, including partial conversion. 43 And the Sages were also well aware of this phenomenon: "Said R. Hamn: What was perpetrated by the coastal cities was not perpetrated even by the generation of the Flood, for it is written: 'Woe unto the inhabitants of the sea-coast, the nations of the Cherethites,' which means that they deserved to be
abolished (barath). Yet for whose sake do they stand? For the sake of one gentle and one God-fearing person whom the Holy One, blessed be He, receives from their hands.⁴⁴ And here too there was an awareness by the Sages of the echoes emanating both from the proselytes and the peoples of the world. Thus, for example, the concept embodied in the ruling that “a proselyte is like a child newly born,”⁴⁵ created the reality in which when the proselyte, Neopythis, had married the wife of his maternal brother and the matter was submitted to the Sages they ruled: “The law of marriage does not apply to a proselyte.”⁴⁶ The same applies in the account of Ben Yassuam: “When I went to the coastal cities I came across a certain proselyte who had married the wife of his maternal brother. Said I to him: Who permitted you (this marriage)? He replied to me: Be told the woman and her seven children; on this bench sat R. Akiba when he made two statements: a proselyte may marry the wife of his maternal brother.⁴⁷

However, later they ruled against incest among proselytes, that it should not be said that “they exchanged a (religious) stricture for (one of) more easygoing sanction.”⁴⁸ The reason is in full agreement with that of Paul, who reacted to a similar situation in his Letter to the Corinthians: “It is commonly reported that there is fornication among you, and of a kind that is not found even among gentiles; for a man is living with his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”⁴⁹ That is to say, Paul was also shaken by the fact that, of all people, the new Christians, who had abandoned paganism, had gone, as it were, from a stricter state of holiness to a less stringent one. Moreover, it is clear from these rulings of the Sages that they agree that the non-Jews are generally disciplined about incest. And, in fact, during the period of the Amoraim, there was a change in the concept that a non-Jew “has no father.”⁵⁰ It is likely that there is even a connection between the very complex reality of the non-Jewish ambience in the Hellenistic-Roman world, including its attitude to Jews and Judaism, and the evolution of the concepts of “righteous among the nations”⁵¹ and “commandments of the children of Noah.”⁵² In other words, it seems that the Sages’ perceptions of “righteous among the nations” and “commandments” obligatory upon the “children of Noah” basically derive not only from an immanent internal development but also from the bilateral relationship between the Gentile world and that of the Sages. Fundamental to this is the recognition that, on the one hand, not all non-Jews are licentious and unruly, and that, on the other, there is a sort of program, theoretical for the time being, but with practical potential for the future, to fix the immoral status of the non-Jew who is not in the world of the Halakha.

Antisemitism, then, was a serious place in the consciousness and reactions of the Sages. The reactions of the Sages to antisemitism, it turns out, were not uniform but varied and most complex. The differences and distinctions are recognizable, not only from period to period, but given from Sage to Sage within the same period.
prostitution, from the meat of what is strangled, and from blood.) cf. further Sifra, Akrei Mot, Chapter 13:10 (the incest scroll). In praise of the Gentiles who have accepted the commandments, extreme things are said: "Whence (do we know that) even a gentile who does not as the Torah prescribes is as a High Priest? Scripture says: 'which if a man do, he shall live by them'. . . " (ibid. 13; T. B. B. K. 38a; T. B. Sanh. 59a; T. B. Av. Zar. 3a. And see Urose, Sages, pp.543-544).