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Jewish Responses to Catastrophe  
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The Golden Throne

While narrative of *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* looks back to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 68-70 C.E., it becomes the paradigm for Kiddush ha-Shem in the Middle Ages and is widely invoked during the Crusader massacres in the eleventh and twelfth centuries<sup>1</sup>. The artful weaving of history into memory and memory into history allows this narrative to take on its transtemporal importance. The destruction of the Temple was a significant historical event that becomes inscribed in memory as the benchmark for Jewish suffering. This archetype then becomes applied to future historical periods of Jewish suffering. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* builds on the existing tropes of martyrdom in literature; the process of sin-retribution-restoration, the foreign ruler, the frustration of a nation that is politically and militarily powerless, the theme of revenge, and the placing of blame for the suffering on the Jews themselves. Although this narrative does pick up on themes introduced by earlier works that deal with suffering and the archetype of the destruction of the Temple, radical changes to the archetype are introduced to achieve new theological assertions. Through the patterns, and breeches in the patterns, in the experiences of the ten sages, *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* advances its assertion that faith in God ultimately triumphs over all forms of suffering in this world because God will reward the righteous and punish the evil when God enacts justice in the world to come.

good  
intro.  
very  
martyr

One theme throughout the story is the unbelievable? fantastic religious devotion of the sages. The reader is provided with accounts of their piety throughout their lives and at the moments leading up to their deaths. There are, in fact, two entirely different forms of religious devotion expressed in the narrative. The first is based on conduct, and the second is based on faith and trust in God.

Whether the conduct of the sage is praised because he is well learned in Torah like Rabbi Akiva or well behaved like Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion, the reader is informed that each sage led an exemplary life. And the narrative shows that this conduct continues through the very moments of their individual deaths. Each sage is famous in his community for the specific manner of conduct that professes his religious devotion, and no other information is provided about them or their lives. Their unique forms of religious devotion are designed to be the dominant forces of their beings and personalities. Ultimately, the sages, who are known for their excellent individual conduct, also become famous for their horrific individual deaths. ✓

The second aspect of religious devotion, faith and trust in God, is far more important to the story than the Rabbis' conduct throughout their lives. While the lives of the Rabbis have been exemplary, the moments that this narrative is primarily concerned with are their deaths. These moments present the ultimate tests for exemplary devotion to God. There is a great tension among the contemporary audiences of this narrative and this tension is inscribed into the story through the questions of the emperor and his non-Jewish servants. They challenge the convictions of the rabbis just before their deaths with various exclamations; "Yet you still trust in your God!"<sup>2</sup>, "You still trust in your God!"<sup>3</sup>, "Do you still hold trust in the Torah and in the God who gave it"<sup>4</sup>. They simply cannot fathom how the rabbis can be so steadfast in their faith. excellent

The repeated questioning of the captors and affirmation of the sages serves two purposes. The captors ask these questions over and over because they express the deep, and not easily diluted, tensions felt by the audience of this narrative. In addition, this repeated pattern enforces the notion of exemplary faith for those who find this path difficult. ✓

Because *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* intends to establish religious devotion as the means to achieve salvation in the world to come, the narrative introduces a unique pattern of martyrdom as

the highest demonstration of exemplary faith. To stress the value and the power of faith, the narrative sets the fantastic religious devotion of the rabbis directly against their uniquely horrific deaths. While faith triumphs over torture in each case, the gruesome and descriptive deaths of these individual rabbis are unprecedented in the literary responses to catastrophe. Graphic torture is inflicted upon individuals who have names and personages. The tragedy is further amplified because these personages are considered to be the greatest members of their communities. The murder and martyrdom in this story represents the destruction, and the desecration, of the sacred person. ✓

To heighten the tragedy yet further, the narrative connects the time of death of the rabbis to various holidays. Rabbi Yuda ben Baba is executed before Shabbat<sup>5</sup>, Rabbi Yuda ben Dema is executed before Shavuot<sup>6</sup>, Rabbi Hanina ben Hakhinai is executed on Shabbat<sup>7</sup>, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamu'a is executed on Yom Kippur. The timely occurrences of the rabbis' brutal deaths suggest that these executions represent the destruction of sacred time as well as the destruction of sacred people. ✓

Despite the repetition of gruesome deaths, there is a positive thread of angelic sympathy that is woven into the pattern of the narrative. The angels express the same tension as the audience as they cry out to God for justice and question the plight of these righteous martyrs. "A righteous man like this, ... shall this man be murdered so cruelly by so wicked a man? *This is Torah? This is its reward?*"<sup>8</sup>. The angels are not immune to mourning for and crying over the dead sages. "For three days and for three nights the angelic host wept over Rabbi Akiba"<sup>9</sup>. The angelic beings are genuinely concerned with the welfare of the righteous and recognize a special potential for holiness among them. When Rabbi Ishmael ascends to heaven and speaks with Gabriel, Gabriel comments, "For to you the Holy One, blessed be He, has revealed matters He ✓

has not disclosed even to the angelic host”<sup>10</sup>. This is quite an honor and a comfort to people in times of distress because it suggests that God certainly considers people as important. In times of great distress, there is comfort from the knowledge that humans are privileged with some information that that even the angelic beings do not possess. right

In addition to the sympathy of the angelic host, the narrative presents other rewards for exemplary piety in the face of brutal death. There are generally periods of intense mourning and lamenting over the deaths of the rabbis by both people and angels. Elijah himself comes to help with the “funeral procession” and burial in a few of the cases. As the pattern of religious devotion and brutal death recycles itself, even the captors become sympathetic toward the rabbis. Despite the horrific deaths, the great lamenting seems to further glorify their acts of martyrdom and vindicate their pious lives and faith in God.

The recurring oracular voice (or the Bat Kol) is a clear, verbal vindication of the triumph of religious devotion over intense destruction of the sacred. After each death, the oracular voice comes to affirm that the soul of the person who died has attained eternal life with God. ✓  
“Blessed art thou, Rabbi Akiba. For you were righteous and just, and now your soul has departed you, righteous and just”<sup>11</sup>. This is a powerful statement by the oracular voice. After a tremendously horrific death, the narrative asserts that Rabbi Akiba is actually *blessed*. The narrative demands that the audience redefine its conception of blessing as one that does not focus on the present world, but on the world to come. To be certain that the audience learns about the reward for exemplary faith in God, the oracular voice declares, “Rabbi Hanina and his executioner have both gained entrance to eternal life in the world-to-come”<sup>12</sup>. ✓  
When people find that they have no military or political power to improve their situation, they can trust that faith in God will secure their souls eternal life.

The promise of eternal life to the righteous is a primary theological understanding that *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* intends to impart to its audience. The narrative argues that God's kingdom, the world to come, is both attainable and quite immanent. Its immanence is suggested by the decreased severity of suffering in the narrative. When the later deaths are discussed, very little detail is given, especially when compared to the vivid descriptions that accompany the earlier deaths. The manners of death for Rabbi Hanina ben Hakhinai and Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamu'a are left rather ambiguous. In fact, if the oracular voice had not announced that the soul of Rabbi Eleazar ben Shamu'a "has departed [him] in purity"<sup>13</sup>, the audience would not necessarily have known that the order for execution was performed.

very interesting observation

The plight of the rabbis also seems ameliorated toward the end of narrative because they seem to acquire many of the non-Jews, the captors and advisors of the emperor, as allies. "The emperor's officers and counselors came and beseeched him to permit Rabbi Hutzapit to be buried because they had taken pity upon the sage's elderly age"<sup>14</sup>. While the emperor's men plead for Rabbi Hutzapit, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion's executioner not only expedites Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion's death but decides to join in his faith and in his fate. "The executioner fanned the flames, removed the tufts of wool..." and "threw himself upon the flames and was consumed by the fire"<sup>15</sup>. A similar act is performed by the elder wise man who warns the emperor against further brutalities toward the Jews. When the emperor decrees his execution, the elder wise man circumcises himself before his death. In both of these cases, a non-Jew comes to believe that the kingdom of God is greater than that of the emperor. The narrative uses the cases of the non-Jews who exhibit faith in God to show that although God does not fulfill all God's promises speedily in this world, God's kingdom is always immanent.

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As Jewish suffering is lessened in this world and non-Jews begin to profess their faith in God, the narrative chooses to struggle with the question of God's justice. Divine justice poses significant tensions for contemporary Jews of this story, and this is evident in the dialogue between the emperor and Rabbi Hutzapit, Rabbi Yuda ben Baba, and Rabbi Yuda ben Dema. The emperor expresses the apprehension of the Jews over and over in his attempts to shake the faith of the righteous rabbis. He berates Rabbi Hutzapit:

'How long will you trust in your God? He has no power to rescue you from my hands. My ancestors destroyed His temple. They strewed the corpses of His servants around Jerusalem. No one was there to bury them. And now your God Himself is old, He has no more strength to save you. For if He had any strength, would He not already be avenging Himself, His people, as He once did to Pharaoh, Siserah, and all the kings of Canaan?'<sup>16</sup>.

Rabbi Yuda ben Baba addresses a similar challenge from his captors, "A great and awesome king requires our deaths. He has merely handed us over to your ruler so as to later requite our blood from his hands"<sup>17</sup>. Rabbi Yuda ben Baba's statement infuriates the emperor because it declares that God is the most powerful ruler. In Rabbi Yuda ben Baba's next response, the narrative rewrites the archetypical understanding of the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the destruction of the Temple, the Jews have been anxiously awaiting the moment when God will exact retribution on God's enemies. They have not yet witnessed God's revenge in history, and this has inspired a deep well of fear and doubt. This has been the archetype of the destruction of the Temple which the narrative strives to overturn. "O Caesar! Wicked man! Son of a wicked man! Did the Lord not see His temple destroyed, His righteous and pious servants murdered? And yet He did not make haste to avenge them at once"<sup>18</sup>. Through Rabbi Yuda ben Baba's comment, the narrative proclaims a statement of faith that God will ultimately exact justice for the destruction of Jerusalem in the long term. And just as God will exact justice for the Temple

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in the long term, so too, in the long term, will God exact justice for the sins of the emperor. This is not an insignificant concept. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* takes the most outstanding archetype of fear and turns it into an archetype of faith. All injustices in this world will be dealt with in the world to come. Rabbi Yuda ben Dema informs the emperor what he can expect, “The shame, the disgrace you will feel when you see us united with the Holy Name in light eternal, while you reside in the lowest, deepest depths of hell!”<sup>19</sup>. God’s kingdom is the world to come, and this is the only kingdom with which people should be concerned.

very nice

Because the Jews should only be concerned with their situation in the world to come, they should be able to deal with the suffering that they will inevitably encounter in this world. While Rabbi Yeshivav the Scribe says that this event was ordained by God and will ultimately be avenged, he shares a somber vision with his students that Torah will be forgotten and “this wicked nation is fated to shed the innocent blood of Israel”<sup>20</sup>. Rabbi Yeshivav’s message is that the continued terror and torture of the Jews will not cease in this world. Fortunately, the audience learns from the larger narrative that this is something that they can tolerate. Suffering in this world is not true suffering. The pious sages teach us this lesson as their faith in God triumphs again and again over their horrific deaths. As the executioners rip the face off of Rabbi Ishmael, he releases two incredibly loud moans. He does not moan the loss of his life but for the loss of his ability to place his tefillin. The text explicitly makes this point to enforce the promise that those who have faith in God have nothing to fear in this world.

While Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion exhibits this same lack of fear when faced with his death, he also espouses the strongest ideal of martyrdom. As he burns to death, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion weeps for the burning of the Torah. In addition, he comments to his daughter, “It pleases me, my daughter, to have you see me now”<sup>21</sup>. This is precisely the opposite sentiment

that one would expect a father to have at this seemingly tragic moment. Sanctification of God's name through martyrdom is a public process, and this particular case takes this notion one step further by incorporating family, specifically a child, as a witness. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion is proud that his daughter is a witness to his greatest sanctification of God's name. This is the tradition of extreme martyrdom that he passes down to her. ✓

Another theological issue that this narrative addresses is the cause of the trouble that plagues the Jewish people. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* places the blame for Jewish suffering on the Jews themselves, in three distinct ways. First, the narrative tells the audience that the sages suffer for the sins of Joseph's brothers. "The transgression served the rabbis as a mode of rationalizing the suffering they endured by connecting the travail of their existence with the national past"<sup>22</sup>. The narrative also presents a situation where trouble arises when the sages teach the Torah to non-Jews<sup>23</sup>. Lastly, the two opening parables, the trees and the Temple, suggest that the arrogance of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple led to their suffering. The Jews as a people are ultimately responsible for their own dismal situation. However, they maintain the individual capacity to achieve eternal life with God in the world to come. self-blame

Through the lament of Rabbi Judah, the narrative anticipates a tension with respect to the attainment of eternal life. After the oracular voice declares that the executioner of Rabbi Hanina has achieved eternal life in the world to come, Rabbi Judah comments, "Some men gain eternal life for themselves in a single moment, like that executioner, while others work all their lives to win this reward and then lose it in a single moment"<sup>24</sup>. At first, the reader sympathizes with the lament of Rabbi Judah, and this is a sad and frustrating moment in the story. However, it is more likely for people to have the experiences of the former person mentioned in Rabbi Judah's excellent



comment. The ability to gain eternal life in one moment before death is an immensely positive opportunity for the average Jew. If a non-Jew, who was the executioner of the great Jewish sages, could merit eternal life, than certainly an average Jew could achieve it as well. Eternal life in the world to come is not exclusively reserved for the greatest rabbis of the period. ✓

Through both the repeated motifs and the discontinuities in the rabbis experiences, *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* asserts that God's kingdom is in the world to come, and that is the time in which religious devotion in life, especially in the ultimate form of martyrdom, will be rewarded with eternal life beside God while justice will be exacted upon those who do evil. Through the great laments of both people and angels and the short explanations given by the oracular voice after each death, the audience learns that the rabbis' steadfast faith in God ultimately triumphs over the brutal deaths they receive. Through the lens of martyrdom, this story reinterprets the most terrifying moments imaginable as moments for hope and joy. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* intensifies the experience of martyrdom from previous literary works through descriptions of unprecedented faith in the face of unprecedented suffering. Although God does not seek retribution in the short term, the amelioration of suffering and the changing attitudes of the non-Jews in the story suggest that God's kingdom is quite immanent. Through the dialogue between the rabbis and their students, and families, at the very moment of their deaths, the audience learns to redefine suffering. True suffering does not occur in this world but in the world to come. The rabbis in the story are quite comfortable living and dying with this knowledge, and they model the ideal behavior in front of all the witnesses among the Jewish people. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* argues that it is not upon the "thrones of gold"<sup>25</sup> of earthly rulers that one should seek to rest but upon the "golden thrones"<sup>26</sup> of God. The events in the narrative suggest that sitting on the golden thrones of earthly rulers results in tragedy, while sitting on the golden

What we would call democratization

Wow!

thrones of God demonstrates the attainment of the ideal eternal life. "Each and every angel will bring golden thrones upon which the righteous souls will all sit in purity"<sup>27</sup>. *The Ten Harugei Malkhut* becomes the paradigm for martyrdom and for contextualizing Jewish suffering, and it provides the audience with a source of strength and comfort in the world to come when no solace can be found in this world.

A perfect paper. Full of insight.  
With your permission, I shall keep a copy in my files.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Stern, David and Mirsky, Mark Jay. *Rabbinic Fantasies*, p. 144.
  - <sup>2</sup> Roskies, David G. *The Literature of Destruction*, p. 64.
  - <sup>3</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>4</sup> Roskies, p. 66.
  - <sup>5</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>6</sup> Roskies, p. 66.
  - <sup>7</sup> Roskies, p. 68.
  - <sup>8</sup> Roskies, p. 63.
  - <sup>9</sup> Roskies, p. 64.
  - <sup>10</sup> Roskies, p. 61.
  - <sup>11</sup> Roskies, p. 64.
  - <sup>12</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>13</sup> Roskies, p. 69.
  - <sup>14</sup> Roskies, p. 67.
  - <sup>15</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>16</sup> Roskies, p. 67.
  - <sup>17</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>18</sup> Roskies, p. 66.
  - <sup>19</sup> Roskies, p. 66.
  - <sup>20</sup> Roskies, p. 68.
  - <sup>21</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>22</sup> Stern, p. 146.
  - <sup>23</sup> Stern, p. 145.
  - <sup>24</sup> Roskies, p. 65.
  - <sup>25</sup> Roskies, p. 60.
  - <sup>26</sup> Roskies, p. 69.
  - <sup>27</sup> Roskies, p. 69.