**Memories of the Destruction**

1.

Shortly after the Second Temple was destroyed, a Jerusalem priest named Josephus Flavius, formerly Yosef ben Matityahu, settled in Rome to write a history of the Jewish War against the Romans. As an eye-witness to the events, it was only natural that he based his history on his memory. He wasn’t the only one who did this.

Another eye-witness, Justus of Tiberias, one of Josephus’ political rivals, also wrote about the events of that time, as did a number of Roman military and administrative heads. Although the latter works have been lost, Josephus’ and especially Justus’ criticism of them, make it clear that each writer had a different version of the same events, and that their choice of what to remember and how to portray it reflects their cultural, intellectual and social milieu.

Josephus and Justus were Jews whose particular circumstances greatly influenced their literary product. What about other Jews? Jewish society on the eve of the destruction was a mélange of social classes, religious sects, priests, and ordinary folk, as well as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and so forth. Did each group have its own “destruction story” that reflected its world, its values, and perhaps even the lives of its members during the war? The main Talmudic stories of the destruction have come down to us from later Rabbinic literature. Third century Tannaitic literature makes almost no mention of the destruction. Stories about the fall of the Temple appear only in fifth century Amoraic literature. Although I believe that a careful reading of these stories can reveal the different, and often contradictory, descriptions of events that were passed down in divided Jewish society even as the smoke from the flames of the Temple climbed skyward above the ruined city.

2.

I imagine that this sounds like the product of the last century’s historiographic culture that held that ancient sources contain historical nuggets that reveals ‘what really happened.’ But rest assured, it isn’t my intention to tell you ‘what happened’ but ‘what was remembered,’ or to be more precise, which memories were chosen to be handed down. Maurice Halbwachs has taught us that all memory is social memory. The events are understood in human memory according to the culture and values of the individual. Instead of dealing with the tragic events of the summer of the year 70, I'll discuss the question of how those events were remembered in the decades following the destruction. Indeed, even this last statement is complex. The late Jacob Neusner’s extremely influential studies have taught us that Benedetto Croce’s insight that ‘all history is contemporary history’ is true regarding Rabbinic literature. Many contemporary scholars claim that the stories of the Second Temple destruction and Bar Kokhba Revolt that appear in the midrash Lamentations Rabbah have nothing to teach us about the events of 70 CE, but that they are excellent sources for learning about fifth century Jewish society and culture – the estimated period when the midrash was edited.

I would now like to present an intermediate approach. If Rabbinic literature is not a historical depiction of what happened, it may be able to teach us how people experienced and remembered what took place. At least two levels can be discerned in Rabbinic literature: one, the later level, when the work was edited, reflects the ideological and cultural world at the time the work was composed. But, it is also possible to single out from this level the memories that crystallized in earlier generations and were passed down over the centuries until they were inserted and edited in the works before us.

3.

The rabbinic story of the destruction appears in four versions: in the midrash Lamentations Rabbah, whose date is commonly accepted as the fifth century; in the Babylonian Talmud, which was edited in the sixth century; and in two other versions in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, which I will deal with in this lecture. The history of the transmission of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan is very complicated. Today there are two versions that share a number of similarities and common points, but the differences between them are striking. The two versions (Version A and Version B) received their final form around the end of the Byzantine period. Their common source is an ancient work based on the Tannaitic book Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) that was apparently composed at the end of the third century. This source, which we shall call the “ancient” or “original” Avot de-Rabbi Nathan developed into the two versions we have before us. Most of the destruction story appears in these two versions of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan; we may therefore assume that it also existed in the ancient and original Avot de-rabbi Nathan.

4.

The destruction story in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan is divided into separate, clearly marked units, very different from one another. The first story, which may be called ‘Ribaz’s departure,’ opens with these words: “And when Vespasian came and surrounded Jerusalem, he beheld the walls of Jerusalem.” The story tells of Ribaz’ escape from the city in a coffin and presenting himself to Vespasian. The second version may be termed as the “siege story” and begins like this: “And when Vespasian came and surrounded Jerusalem he beheld Jerusalem from the east.” This opening sentence seems to have been unknown to the earlier story and appears as a new lead-in to the siege story. The narrative ends with the destruction of Jerusalem: “It was then that Jerusalem was captured.” The third story is a lament on Jerusalem that opens with a description of Ribaz waiting for the destruction of the city. Upon receiving the terrible news, he mourns the loss. This is followed by a number of homilies on the sorrow and pain of the sages regarding the destruction. Let us examine the form and content of each story and try to identify the social groups/circles that produced them.

5.

The story of Ribaz’ flight from Jerusalem is based on the struggle between Ribaz and the rebels. The rebels believe they can kill Vespasian; Ribaz on the other hand demands that they accept the conditions for surrender. The story portrays surrender to Vespasian as a gesture that symbolizes acquiescing to Roman rule. The rebels’ refusal bolsters their recklessness and irresponsibility regarding the city’s future. Indeed, their delusion is the focus of Ribaz’ criticism. Furthermore, Ribaz is referred to as the ‘Caesar [emperor] lover,’ identifying him as Vespasian’s political and ideological ally. Ribaz’ failure to convince the rebels brought him to the decision to flee the city, at which point the story reaches its dramatic climax. The escape from Jerusalem tore apart the brotherhood of fighters and people under siege, and is thus seen as the event that sealed the fate of the Temple. Did Ribaz disguise himself as a corpse to abscond from the city? Let it be noted that he didn’t go it alone. He left with two of his prize pupils: R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. Then he addressed Vespasian. At this point we see a key difference between the two versions. In Version A, Ribaz, as an emperor-lover, is immediately rewarded, and goes on to prophesy to Vespasian that he is destined to be emperor. Version B is more nuanced. Ribaz greets Vespasian in Latin: “Ave domine imperator.” After this unexpected salutation, Vespasian is overcome with fear that he might be considered to be rebelling against Nero and seeking Jewish support. Ribaz calms the general’s fear and repeats that he will soon be emperor. Ribaz is thrown in prison until messengers arrive from Rome and inform Vespasian that Nero is dead and that he has been elected emperor. Then Ribaz is freed and gifted with Yavne. In Version B, Ribaz’ prophecy is woven into the story while in Version A it appears detached and out of context. I suggest that it is plausible to assume that Version A reflects an earlier stage when the prophecy story was an independent narrative and was added to the section dealing with Ribaz and Vespasian, whereas Version B is a reworked rendition by the editor who felt uncomfortable because of the disconnection of the prophecy and endeavored to weave it into the story. This gives us a visible linguistic indication of the time when the prophecy was inserted into the Ribaz narrative. Version B introduces Ribaz’ royal greeting in Latin. This addition enabled the editor to insert Ribaz’s prophecy because the Latin salutation causes Vespasian to fear for his life and, following this, Ribaz prophesizes to Vespasian that he is destined to become emperor. Undoubtedly Ribaz’ address to Vespasian reminded many people of the famous salutation to Claudius spoken by those sentenced to death just before the naumachia in the year 52: “Ave Imperator, morituri te salutant.” Roman emperors in the first and second centuries were sticklers for being addressed as “Imperator,” and one of them even shockingly rebuffed the term “domine” because it implied tyranny. However, by the end of the third century and throughout the fourth century, the combined term “Imperator domine” was a frequently used title for the emperor. In other words, the unique insertion of prophecy in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan was created in the fourth century and is not from the early layer. Also, it is hard to imagine that the flowing, logical narrative in Version B would come apart in so strange and non-sequitur a manner in a later version.

Putting the Ribaz prophecy aside, let us sum up the story of his escape. This is a political tale that depicts the rise of the Ribaz as a new leader. It opens with the bitter struggle between Ribaz and the rebels on the wisdom of revolting against Rome. Ribaz severs the brotherhood and leaves the city. He has no qualms about being counted among the ‘emperor lovers’ and, in exchange, he receives the right to establish a kind of beit midrash (house of Torah study) in Yavne: “I ask of you only Yavne [so that I can] go there and teach pupils.” Ribaz’ students enabled him to flee the city and it is they who fill the house of study. In this story, Vespasian is depicted in an overwhelmingly positive light. Even Ribaz’ prophecy that Vespasian is destined to destroy the Temple does not penalize him. The rebels are to blame for the destruction because they rejected Vespasian’s offer to surrender and scorned Ribaz’ political wisdom. From here, it is a short step to assume that Ribaz’ pupils produced this story. Two of the senior scholars appear by name, which might indicate that they were being groomed as his heirs. At the same time, it is also an apologetic story. Most probably there were Jewish groups that would have defended the leader’s escape in the nation’s most trying hours. For them the story proves that the destruction was not the outcome of schism and betrayal but the result of the rebels’ delusional obstinacy.

6.

The siege narrative is an entirely different story. Before discussing its content, I should mention the literary and formal differences between the two stories. The most glaring difference is the way the story proceeds. In the Ribaz story, the speaker performs the significant actions: Vespasian speaks to the rebels and the rebels answer; Ribaz speaks to the rebels and they reply; we learn of Ribaz’ decision to leave the city through his speech to his pupils, and so forth. The pupils and the guards engage in a dialogue at the gates of the city. In the end, Vespasian bestows Yavne upon those Jews who remained loyal to Rome. On the other hand, in the siege story the protagonists barely utter a word. The story progresses through the intensive use of action verbs: Vespasian surrounds Jerusalem; the rebels burn the grain treasury; the people of Jerusalem wage war. Afterwards, a rather detailed section describes the stages of the siege: they brought, they carried out, they hurled, they made a bow, they hurled a pig’s inside, and so forth. The literary discrepancies between each of the stories indicate that they were composed by diverse people of disparate literary backgrounds. Added to these differences are the basic discrepancies in the characters and story content that can reveal something about the circles that composed them.

The rebels' character is distinctly different from that in the Ribaz’ story. Although we hear of the zealots who burned the grain treasuries, it should be noted that the event did not detract from the Jerusalemites’ fighting ability. Vespasian was very impressed by the fortitude of the rebel warriors despite their starvation. According to the story, Jerusalem was destroyed not because of hunger but by something else. In the Ribaz’ story, Vespasian appears as an honorable military commander whose modest demands are reasonable; here he appears as a religious villain incapable of fighting. The Roman army’s actions are pitiful compared to those of the rebels. In this story, Roman siege tactics are described at length, as in the section on the construction of a siege tower and battering ram. The term ‘bow’ apparently refers to a catapult. Time constraints prevent me from explaining these terms in greater detail, but they indicate close familiarity with Roman army siege engines. Menahem Kister has shown that the term ‘bow’ is absent in Rabbinic literature but was used in Hebrew in the days of the Second Temple; thus, this section can be said to be much earlier than the edited version that is before us and was adapted from the memories of the siege of Jerusalem. Getting back to Vespasian: although the city wall was breached, the Temple still stood. Vespasian now employs a different tactic: he hurls the head of a pig onto the altar. Version B describes in detail the attempt to defile the sacrifices on the altar. Immediately after this, it states: “At the same hour Jerusalem was captured.” This sentence definitively culminates the story. However, it appears only in Version A. In Version B there’s a lengthy description of Titus’ entry into the Temple, plundering the Holy of Holies, and the punishment meted out to him. Kister has explained that it was taken from later sources. Inserting this sentence cancels the culminating sentence that was preserved in Version A. According to the siege story, Jerusalem was destroyed not because of rebels’ foolhardiness; on the contrary, they’re depicted as heroes and valiant warriors. Nor was it destroyed because of the brilliant generalship of Vespasian since he himself admitted that the rebels had proven themselves better fighters than his troops. The destruction occurred because of Vespasian’s blasphemous chicanery in defiling the altar. When the deed was over, the Temple and city were no more. I believe that this last sentence has much to say about the author of the siege story. The centrality of Temple duties is what enables the Temple and the city to exist, which is of course a manifestly priestly notion. We also learn from Josephus’ writing that some of the priests played a major role in the rebel leadership. It’s enough to mention Elazar ben Hanania, whom Josephus called the strategos of the Temple, who was instrumental in curtailing the peace sacrifice to the emperor – an event that is considered the start of the revolt. The literary nature of this section lends certain credence to the possibility that it was produced in priestly circles. The language is particularly concise, made up of short sentences that are mostly actions: surrounded, burned, considered, did, made, and so forth. There is no expression of emotion on the part of the characters. Unlike the description of Ribaz and his pupils’ lamentation in the following: “They wept and wailed and eulogized.” No mention is made of the main figures’ thoughts, unlike the description of Ribaz’ escape and the considerations that motivated Ribaz to flee the city. There is nothing in the siege story of the causal connection, by the use of expressions such as ‘since,’ ‘because,’, etc. The literary elements are reminiscent of chronicle writing. In conclusion, this is a chronicle - not a story with a plot-line. As we know, the chronicle was a rather common genre in oriental temples, and the Jerusalem priests probably adopted it.

7.

The last story deals with Ribaz and his pupils’ lamentation over Jerusalem. Here Ribaz seems to have gone from being an opponent of the revolt and the emperor’s great admirer to a heart-broken Jew who mourns and bewails the destruction of Jerusalem. I do not see a contradiction here. Throughout the *Jewish Wars*, Josephus blames the rebels for the destruction, exonerates Titus of all guilt, and explicitly expresses great sorrow over the loss of the Temple. Furthermore, the lamentation story in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan not only bemoans the tragedy, it also says who is to blame. The story begins with Ribaz’s comparison to Eli the Priest. Eli waited anxiously for news of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines and death of his sons and Ribaz too awaits the news of the Temple’s destruction. The comparison to Eli also contains a broader parallel to the circumstances surrounding the destruction. The fall of the Ark of the Covenant into Philistine hands comes as punishment for Israelite leaders’ moral corruption. Both of Eli’s sons are guilty of exploiting their priestly status in order to steal from the public. Comparing Ribaz to Eli could imply that the reason for Temple’s fall was not the cruelty of the Romans but the priests’ venality. Indeed, this is explicitly stated immediately following the lamentation. The dirge ends with the priests committing suicide when they admit, “We were deceitful treasurers.” I would say that the image of eating and the table is designed to point specifically to Eli’s sons. Both Josephus and the Rabbinic literature accuse the priests of unscrupulousness. It emphatically states that the theological reason for the destruction was priestly exploitation.

8.

In conclusion, a careful reading of the literary style and content of the story of the destruction in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan reveals that it is not one story but two narratives plus a lamentation. The story of Ribaz’ flight from Jerusalem was undoubtedly produced by a coterie of his pupils, whereas the siege story was unquestionably written by certain rebel groups that were linked to the priests or may have been priests themselves. Although we may question many details in Josephus’ and the sages’ descriptions of these and other events, I would say that Jewish society on the eve of the destruction was divided and polarized. Post-destruction Rabbinic literature seems to present Jewish society united in obeying God’s commandments without any trace of the division, tension, hatred, and mistrust that characterized the end of the Second Temple. Many scholars perceive this as an expression of the sages’ ability to consolidate Jewish society after the ruins, and forge a ‘magnificent coalition’ as Shaye Cohen termed it, in Yavne. The reconstruction of memories in various circles after the loss of the Temple teaches us that conflicting views of the destruction and the social circles responsible for it remained entrenched in Jewish society for a long time.

However, we cannot suffice with only a reconstruction of building blocks and various contradictory stories. The merging of these stories can teach us something about the nature of collective memory at the time of their editing. It turns out that around two hundred years after the destruction, the sharp polarities that appear in the Ribaz story had faded. Now the older memories could be added. Indeed, the art of composing and editing was carried out in the sages’ beit midrash. The story not only implies the priests’ guilt – especially the zealot priests who joined the revolt – it also describes the demise of the priesthood class in the flames of the Temple. Ribaz and his pupils certainly didn’t leap with joy at the fate of the zealot priests. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore Ribaz’ words in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan that appear close to the destruction story.