



Alexander was he Great? Rabbinic Criticism of Rome Through Alexander Narratives

Dr. Benjamin Martin Levy

Rabbi Ben Levy, DHL is adjunct associate professor at JTS. He has studied Midrash at in the Gershon Kekst Graduate School under the tutelage of Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky for the past nine years and has taught Rabbinic Narrative in Nishma, JTS' summer beit midrash program for five of those years. Having just completed the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters, Rabbi Levy has written a dissertation entitled, *Idealized "Others" in Midrashic Literature: What They Say About Rabbinic Identity*. The dissertation analyzes ways the rabbis used aggadic treatments of various biblical and post-biblical characters to further their agenda, part of which was the establishment of a behavior-based definition of Jewish identity.

Rabbi Levy is the author of *A Faithful Heart: Preparing for the High Holy Days*, a study text based upon Midrash Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu, and *A Faithful Spirit: Preparing for Chanukah*, based on Megillat Antiochus. Rabbi Levy has recently been named Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Etz Chaim in Monroe Township, NJ where he served as spiritual leader for the past twenty-five years.



Detail from Alexander Mosaic, also known as the Battle of Issus Mosaic. A Roman floor mosaic from the House of Faun in Pompeii dated from circa 100 BCE. Supposedly copied from an earlier painting by the Greek artist, Apelles, the mosaic depicts the 333 BCE battle between Alexander's army and that of Darius III of Persia. The work currently resides in the Naples National Archeological Museum

I. ALEXANDER AS A SYMBOL OF ROME

a. Genesis Rabbah 23: 17 (1)...A continuum of hubris

<p><i>'Their inward thought (kirbam) is that their houses shall continue forever'</i> (Psalms 49:12).¹ Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Pinhas [expounded upon this verse]. Rabbi Yudan said: Why did the wicked believe that <i>'their houses would continue forever'</i> (ibid.)? <i>'they called their lands after their own names'</i> (ibid.) - Tiberias after the name Tiberius; Alexandria after the name Alexander; Antioch after the name Antiochus. Rabbi Pinchas said: <i>'Their inward thought is that their houses shall continue forever,'</i> tomorrow their houses will become their graves <i>'their dwelling places for all generations'</i> (ibid.), because they are not living and not judged² - and not only that, but <i>'they called their lands after their own names.'</i>"</p>	<p>קִרְבָּם בְּתִימוֹ לְעוֹלָם וּגו' (תהלים מט: יב), רַבִּי יוֹדֵן וְרַבִּי פִּנְחָס. רַבִּי יוֹדֵן אָמַר מֵה סְבוּרֵי הָרָשָׁעִים שֶׁקִּרְבָּם בְּתִימוֹ לְעוֹלָם וּגו' (תהלים מט: יב) קָרְאוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹתָם עָלַי אֲדָמוֹת. טְבַרְיָה, עַל שֵׁם טִיבֵירִיוֹס, אֶלְכָסְנִדְרִיא, עַל שֵׁם אֶלְכָסְנִדְרוֹס, אֲנִטוֹכִיא, עַל שֵׁם אֲנִטִיוֹכוֹס. וְרַבִּי פִּנְחָס אָמַר קִרְבָּם בְּתִימוֹ לְעוֹלָם, לְמַחֵר בְּתִיָּהֶם נַעֲשִׂים קְבָרֵיהֶם. מִשְׁכַּנְתָּם לְדוֹר וָדוֹר, שְׂאִיֵּן לֹא חַיִּים וְלֹא נִדְוֹנִין, וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שֶׁקָּרְאוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹתָם עָלַי אֲדָמוֹת.</p>
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¹ The JPS translation: *"Their grave is their eternal home, the dwelling-place for all generations of those once famous on earth."* ("קִרְבָּם בְּתִימוֹ לְעוֹלָם מִשְׁכַּנְתָּם לְדוֹר וָדוֹר קָרְאוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹתָם עָלַי אֲדָמוֹת.")

² That is, they will neither be revived nor judged at the time of resurrection. They will remain in their graves eternally.

b. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1 + Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 3:1,
42c...Alexander: Symbol of imperial militarism

Mishnah:, All images (*tzelamim*) are prohibited because they are worshipped once a year; [these are] the words of R. Meir. But the Sages say, ‘It is only prohibited if it has a staff or a bird or an orb³ in its hand.’ Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, ‘Any [image] that has something in its hand.’

Gemara: But the Sages say, “It is only prohibited if it has a staff or a bird or a globe in its hand” [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1].

“A staff”: with which he rules the world.

“A bird”: “*My hand has found, like a nest, the wealth of peoples...*” (Isaiah 10: 14).

“An orb”: for the world is shaped like an orb.

Rabbi Yonah said: When **Alexander Macedon** wanted to ascend, he went up higher, higher, and higher⁴ until he saw the world as a globe and the sea as a bowl. For that reason, they paint him with a globe in his hand.

Let [the artist] paint him with a bowl in his hand!

He does not rule the sea. But the Holy Blessed One rules over the sea and the land. He saves at sea, and He saves on land.

משנה : כל הצלמים אסורים, מפני שהן נעבדו פעם אחת בשנה, דברי רבי מאיר. וחכמים אומרים, אינו אסור אלא כל שיש בידו מקל או צפור או כדור. רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר, כל שיש בידו כל דבר.

גמרא : וחכמים אומרים אינו אסור אלא כל שיש בידו מקל או ציפור או כדור. מקל. שהיה רודה בו את העולם. ציפור. ותמצא כקן / ידו לחיל העמים (ישעיהו י: יד).

כדור. שהעולם עשוי ככדור.

אמר רבי יונה. אלכסנדרוס מקדון כד בעא מיסק לעיל. והיה סלק וסלק סלק עד שראה את העולם ככדור ואת הים כקערה. בגין כן ציורין לה בכדורה בידה. ויצורין קערה בידה. אינו שליט בים. אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא שליט בים וביבשה. מציל בים ומציל ביבשה.

⁴ “Up, up and up.”



Alexander Mosaic, Naples National Archeological Museum. Alexander appears on a horse on the left side and Darius III of Persia rides his chariot. The mosaic is 8 ft 11 in × 16 ft 10 in.

II. INTRODUCING THE ALEXANDER NARRATIVES

a. Tosefta Horayot 2: 5-6: R. Yehoshua's visit, Jews and Rome

It happened⁵ that R. Yehoshua went [to Rome], and they said to him, ‘There is here [in prison] a certain Jerusalemite young boy⁶ with beautiful eyes and good looking, who stands to be disgraced (*kalon*).’⁷ So R. Yehoshua went to investigate the matter. When he arrived at the [prison’s] entrance, he recited this verse, “*Who was it gave Jacob over to despoilment and Israel to plunderers?*” (Isaiah 42:24). That young boy spoke up and said, “*Is it not the Eternal against whom we have sinned and in whose ways they would not walk [and whose Teaching they would not obey]?*” (ibid.). At that moment R. Yehoshua said, ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against me, that I will not move from here until I redeem him.’” He redeemed him with much money and sent him to the Land of Israel. And concerning him it (Scripture) said, “*The precious children of Zion; once praised as fine gold. [Alas, they are accounted as earthen pots, work of a potter’s hands!]*” (Lamentations 4:2).

מעשה שהלך ר' יהושע ואמרו לו
יש כאן תינוק אחד ירושלמי יפי
עינים וטוב רואי ועומד לקלון
והלך ר' יהושע לבודקו כיון
שהגיע לפתח אמי המקרא הזה
מי נתן למשיסה יעקב ישראל
לבוזזים :
נענה אותו תינוק ואמי הלא י"י
זו חטאנו לו ולא א' בדרכיו
באותה שעה אמי ר' יהושע
מעידני עלי שמים וארץ שאיני זז
מיכאן עד שאפדה אותו פדאו
בממון הרבה ושיגרו בארץ ישרי
ועליו אמי בני ציון היקרים
המסולאים בפז :

⁵ *Ma'aseh*, “It occurred,” the rabbis employ this technical term to announce a story of legal or moral import.

⁶ The Hebrew *tinok* may also refer to a suckling. It often means a rabbinical student, not yet ordained.

⁷ According to Marcus Jastrow, the term *kalon*, disgrace connotes prostitution, sodomy, and idolatry. See *A Dictionary of the Targum, the Talmud Babli, and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1903), 1373. For the rabbis, sexual morality stands as one of the great dividing lines between Jews and the Other. For instance, Sifra Ahare Mot 9:8 characterizes the inherited laws of the Romans as given to male and female homosexual marriage, marrying a mother and her daughter, and polyandry. In the eyes of the rabbis all of these practices are forbidden by the oral and written Torah. For more on the tannaim and amoraim using sexual ethics as a tenet of Jewish identity, see Beth A. Berkowitz, *Defining Jewish Difference*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77-139.

b. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 9:1...Jews and Rome, R. Yehoshua b. Levi visits Rome

<p>R. Yehoshua ben Levi⁸ went up to Rome and he saw pillars of marble wrapped in tapestries so that they would not nor crack in the heat nor freeze in the cold. Next to the pillar he saw a pauper with [only] a reed mat under him and a reed mat on his back. Of the pillars the rabbi recited, “<i>Your beneficence is like the mighty mountains</i>” (Psalm 36:7), [He commented] ‘When you bestow, You bestow in abundance.’ And of the poor man he recited, “<i>Your justice is like the deepest depths</i>” (ibid.) He said, ‘When you punish, You are punctilious.’”</p>	<p>ר' יהושע בן לוי סליק לרומי וראה שם עמודים של שייש מכורכים בקיטיות, בשרב שלא יפקעו ובצינה שלא יקרשו, וראה שם עני אחד מחצלת קנים מתחתיו ומחצלת של קנים מעל גביו. על העמודים קרא צדקתך כהררי אל (תהלים ל"ו: ז), הן דאת יהב את משפע, ועל העני קרא משפטיך תהום רבה (שם), אמ' הן דאת מחי את מדקדק.</p>
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⁸ Some versions of the Leviticus Rabbah parallel tell the story in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Hananiah. The Yerushalmi parallel offers stories of rabbis who embrace honesty over material gain.

III. RABBINC NARRATIVES OF ALEXANDER

a. Pesikta d'R. Kahana 9:1 (con't)...Alexander visits Kartagena, city of women

<p>Alexander Macedon went out to visit the king of Katziya⁹ beyond the Mountains of Darkness. He came across a city by the name of Kartagena¹⁰ inhabited entirely by women. They came out before him and said to him, 'If you make war against us and defeat us, your reputation will be diminished in that you have destroyed a country of women. And if we make war with you and defeat you will never be able to stand up before [the other] kings.' When he left he wrote upon the <i>pylon</i>,¹¹ 'I Alexander Macedon was like a stupid king until I came to the city of Kartagena and learned wisdom from women.'</p>	<p>אלכסנדרוס מקדון אזל לגב מלכא קציי לאחור הרי החושך. אזל לחדה מדינת' דשמא קרטיגנא והות כולה דנשין, ונפקין קדמיניה ואמרין ליה, אין את עבד עמן קרבה ונצח לן, שמך נפיק בעולם דמחוז דנשיא חריבת, ואין אנו עבדין עמך קרבה ונצחינך, שמך נפיק בעלמא דנשיא עבדן עמך קרבה ונצחן לך, ותוב לית את קאים קדם מלכו. מי נפק כתב על תרע פולי אנה אלכסנדרוס מקדון כמלך שטי הוינא עד דאתית לקרטיגנא מדינת' וילפית עיצה מנשיא.</p>
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b. PRK 9:1 (con't)...Alexander in Afriki

<p>He went to another city whose name was Afriki. They brought out apples of gold, pomegranates of gold, and bread of gold before him. He said to them, 'Is this what you have to eat in your land?' They said to him, 'You don't have food in your country that you needed to come</p>	<p>זל לחדא מדינתא חורי דשמה אפריקי, ונפקון קדמוניה בחזורין דדהב וברימונין דדהב ובלחם דדהב. אמ' להון, מה דהבא מיתאכיל בארעיון. אמרין ליה, ולא הוה לך כן בארעך</p>
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⁹ The "End of the World." Saul Lieberman explained that *Katziya* is not the king's name, but rather an indication that this king rules over people located at the end of the world (in Afriki, which is modern Tunisia). It is a legendary land, idealized by the early scribes, an Aramaic *utopia*. See the *Heyarot me'et R. Shaul Lieberman* section appearing in Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*: 474.

¹⁰ The name Kartagena consists of the Aramaic word for city, *karta*, and *gynae*, Greek for women, hence "City of Women." The city's name testifies to the use of both Aramaic and Greek in Palestine during the amoraic era.

¹¹ A Greek loan word referring to the tall gate at the entrance of a city.

<p>to us?' He said to them, 'I have not come to see your wealth, I have come to see your law.'</p>	<p>דאטית לגבן. אמי להון לא עותרכון אתיתי למיחמי, דיניכו אתית למיחמי.</p>
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c. PRK 9:1 (con't)...Alexander on jurisprudence

<p>As they were sitting and speaking there, two men came before the king for judgement. One said, 'I bought a ruin from this man. I dug and found a treasure there. I said, 'Take your treasure, I bought a ruin, I did not buy a treasure.' And the other said, 'My Master, I sold a ruin to that man and all that is with it did I sell to him.' The king addressed one of them and said, 'Do you have a son?' He said to him, 'Yes.' And to the other he (the king) said, 'Do you have a daughter? He said to him, 'Yes.' He (the king) said to them, 'Go and marry one to the other and let the two of them enjoy the treasure.'</p> <p>Alexander Macedon began to show amazement. He (the king) said to him, 'Why are you amazed? Did I not judge well?' He (Alexander) said to him, 'Yes.' He (the king) said to him, 'If such a case had occurred in your land how would you have judged it?' He (Alexander) said to him, 'We would have beheaded this one, and beheaded that one, and the treasure would have gone up to the royal household.'¹²</p> <p>He (the king) said to him, 'And does the sun shine upon your country?' He</p>	<p>עד אינון יתיבין תמן, אתון תרין גוברין לדינה קדם מלכא. חד אמי אנה חורבתה זבנית מהאי גברא, וגרפתה ואשכחית בה סימא, ואמרי ליה סב סימתך, דחורבתה זבנית וסימתה לא זבנית. וחרינה אי /אמר/, מרי, אנה כי זבינית להדין גוברא חורבתי וכל מה דאית בה זבינית ליה. קרא מלכא לחד מנהון, אי ליה, אית לך בר דכר, אמי ליה אין. ולחרינה אמי ליה, אית לך ברת נוקבה, אמי ליה אין. אמר להון אזלון ואסבון דין לדין ויאכלון סימתה תריהון. שרי אלכסנדרו מקדון תמה. אי ליה מה לך תמה, לא דנית טבית, אי ליה אין. אי ליה, ואילו הוה הדין דינא בארעכון מה הוויתון עבדין ליה, אמי ליה מרים ראשה דדין וראשיה דדין, וסימתה סלקא לבי מלכי. אי ליה ושימשה דנחא עליכון, אי ליה הין. ומיטרא נחית עליכון, אמי ליה הין. אמי</p>
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¹² Yerushalmi Bava Metzia 2:5, 8a in its parallel reverses the order of the narratives, presenting the story of the two litigants (C) before the tale of the meal of gold (B). Upon being served food made of gold Alexander "Will we eat gold?" The king replied: "You would destroy people, and you tell me you don't eat gold? It is only because mercy is found in my country that we have this much gold." Thus, the king of Katziya asserts the essential nature of compassion.

<p>(Alexander) said to him, ‘Yes.’ [The king said,] ‘And does the rain fall upon your country?’ He (Alexander) said to him, ‘Yes.’ He (the king) said to him, ‘Perhaps there are small animals in your country?’ He (Alexander) said, ‘Yes.’ [The king said,] ‘The breath of that man¹³ should be blown out! By the merit of small animals does the sun shine upon your land, and does the rain fall upon your land. By the merit of small animals are you saved alive.’ As it is written, ‘...<i>human and beast do You save O Eternal</i>’ (Psalm 36:7).”</p>	<p>ליה דילמא אית בארעכון בעיר דקיקא, א"ל הין. תיפח רוחיה דההוא גברא בזכות בעירה דקיקה שימשה דנחה עליכון ומיטרא נחית עליכון, בזכות בעירי דקיקא אתון משתיזבין. ה"ה דכת' אדם ובהמה תושיע י"י (תהלים לו : ז).</p>
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d. Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 24:10...addendum on the Roman judicial system

<p>“<i>For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are My ways your ways, says the Eternal</i>’ (Isa. 55: 8). This is like a robber who has come before the interrogator [<i>kostinor</i>] for judgement. First, he reads the charge against him [<i>analgin</i>], then he whips him; then he gives him the hook [<i>khamos</i>];¹⁴ then he pronounces the sentence [<i>parkula</i>];¹⁵ and then he takes him out to kill him.”</p>	<p>כי לא מחשבותי מחשבותיכם ולא וג' (ישעיה נ"ה : ח), לליסטים שהוא נידון לפני הקוסטינר, בתחילה הוא קורא אנלגין שלו ואחר כך הוא מכה אותו ואחר כך הוא נותן לו כמס ואחר כך נותן לו פרקולה ואחר כך יוצא ליהרג.</p>
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¹³ Use of third person is a very typical Aramaism. He's telling him to drop dead!

¹⁴ According to Saul Lieberman they placed the hook in the defendant's mouth. See Lieberman, S. (1944), “Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the Acta Martyrum,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 35(1), 1–57. See also Burton L. Visotzky, *Aphrodite and the Rabbis*, 157, where the author quoted the word of the Roman historian Tacitus to corroborate the reality of the PRK account of the Roman system of justice. Tacitus writes that the Roman authorities dragged both Emperor Tiberius and Emperor Commodus by the hooks in their mouths and dumped them into the Tiber River to drown.

¹⁵ The use of a multitude of Greek legal terms again identifies Rome as the heir to the Hellenistic culture introduced to the Ancient Near East by Alexander.

IV. POST-SCRIPT

- a. Yerushalmi Bava Metzia 2:5, 8c...Shimon ben Shetah, rabbinic forbear, Yerushalmi's intro to Alexander legends and post-script to this presentation.

<p>“Shimon ben Shetah was engaged with flax [as his profession]. His students said to him: ‘Master, leave it behind and we will buy you a donkey and you won’t need to work so much,’ and they bought him a donkey from a Saracen¹⁶, and it had a jewel hanging from it[‘s neck]. They came to him and said to him: ‘From now on you won’t have to work again.’ He said to them: ‘Why?’ They said to him: ‘We bought you a donkey from a Saracen and it had a jewel hanging from it [‘s neck]!’ He said to them: ‘Did the owner know?’ They said to him: ‘No.’ He said to them: ‘Go return it.’ [The students asked,] ‘But didn’t Rav Huna Bibi bar Gozlon¹⁷ say in the name of Rav, ‘They responded before Rabbi: Even according to the one who says an item stolen from a gentile is prohibited, all agree that an item lost by a gentile is permitted!’?’ [He exclaimed,] ‘What, do you think Shimon ben Shetah is a barbarian? Shimon wished to hear ‘Blessed be the God of the Jews’ more than all the wages of this world!’”</p>	<p>שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן שֵׁטַח הָוָה עָסִיק בְּהַדָּא כִּיתְנָא. אָמְרִין לֵיהּ תַלְמִידוֹי. רַבִּי. אַרְפֵּי מִינְדָּךְ וְאַנְּוּ זְבַנִּין לְךָ חֲדָא חֲמָר וְלִית אַתָּ לַעֲי סוּגִין. אַזְלוֹן זְבַנוֹן לֵיהּ חֲדָא חֲמָר מִחַד סִירְקָאֵי וְתַלִּי בֵיהּ חֲדָא מְרָגְלִי. אַתָּוֹן לְגַבֵּיהּ אָמְרִין לֵיהּ. מִן כְּדוֹן לִית אַתָּ צְרִיךְ לַעֲי תוּבֹן. אָמַר לוֹן. לָמָּה. אָמְרִין לֵיהּ. זְבַנִּינָן לְךָ חַד חֲמָר מִחַד סִירְקָאֵי וְתַלִּי בֵיהּ חֲדָא מְרָגְלִי. אָמַר לוֹן. וְיַדַּע בְּהָ מְרָה. אָמְרִין לֵיהּ. לָא. אָמַר לוֹן. אֵיזֵל חֲזַר. לָא כֹן אָמַר רַב הוּנָא בֵיבֵי בַר גּוֹזְלוֹן בְּשֵׁם רַב. הִתִּיבֹן קוּמֵי רַבִּי. אֶפִּילוֹ כְּמָאן דְּמַר. גְּזִילוֹ שְׁלַגוּי אַסוּרָה. כְּלַעֲמוּ מוֹדֵי שְׁאַבִּידְתּוּ מוֹתְרַת. מַה אַתָּוֹן סְבָרִין שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן שֵׁטַח בְּרַבְרֹן הָוָה?! בְּעֵי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן שֵׁטַח מִשְׁמַע בְּרִיךְ אֱלֹהֵהוֹן דִּיהוּדָאֵי מַאֲגַר כָּל הַדִּין עַלְמָא.</p>
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¹⁶ Arab, desert dweller, one from a nomadic trading tribe (Jastrow, 1904, 1030).

¹⁷ The name Rav Huna Bibi bar Gozlon begs for interpretation! First, the title Rav indicates a Babylonian amora. The name Huna may mean “upstanding” or “The Wealthy One.” Bibi is a pet form of Binyamin in modern Hebrew. Bar is Aramaic for “son of.” A Gozlon is a robber or thief. Therefore, one may render the name of the tradent “Rav Wealthy Benjie son of a Thief.” Such a name indicates that he is not the highest halakhic (or moral) authority. It is no wonder that Shimon ben Shetah rejects his statement.



1893 artist's drawing of the Alexander Mosaic (with added black frame).