

Could the Jews have beaten Rome, or at least not lost?

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By Ralph Seliger

The Jewish rebellions against Rome have long fascinated me — for their ferocity, and for the great victories initially won by the Jews against the greatest empire of the ancient world at the height of its power. I’ve long wondered if the Jews somehow could have managed to win, or if they could have been more prudent and avoided the massive destruction of the Jewish homeland; and what this might have meant for us, as their descendants, if history had turned out differently.

The traditional rabbinical explanation that we recall on Tisha B’Av for the loss of the Jewish homeland (especially in the wars against Rome) is *Sinat Khinam* — causeless hatred. The Jews of Judea and neighboring regions were beset by factionalism and fanaticism, which often led to Jews killing each other, even as the Romans were gathering to crush them.

This was a nationalist rebellion that was also a class revolution (as in the Marxist sense). In 66 CE, Jewish rebel forces took Jerusalem, helped out by zealous radical rebels led by a man known as Menachem. The new aristocratic Jewish rulers rewarded Menachem by having him killed.

A powerful Roman army of 30,000 legionnaires, auxiliaries and allies — including soldiers of a Jewish king, Herod Agrippa II, a grandson of Herod the Great and a client of Rome — marched to crush the revolt. Astonishingly, this army failed to retake Jerusalem and was forced to retreat — suffering a terrible ambush as they retreated at Beit Horon — the same narrow pass where the Maccabees had won a great victory over the Syrian Greeks about 200 years before.

A Jewish aristocrat, known to us as Josephus, was dispatched to defend the Galilee against a new Roman offensive that they knew would come. Josephus fortified several strongholds against the Romans. But before facing them, Josephus came to blows with some radical Jewish forces, even while contending with other wealthy Jews who desperately wanted to patch things up with Rome. In fact, he lost one of his best strongholds, Tiberias, because leading Jews in that city conspired with the Romans and happily opened its gates without a fight.

Josephus’s great stand was at Jotapata (in Hebrew, Yodfat, יִדְפָּת). His army resisted brilliantly, repulsing the Romans under their general Vespasian at least twice before the Romans found their way in by stealth. Josephus famously survived a murder-suicide pact of 30 men hiding in a cave, and went over to the Romans, acting as a Jewish Benedict Arnold, but also becoming a great chronicler of this conflict.

Vespasian reconquered the Galilee and most of the land of Israel up to the gates of Jerusalem. Then he withdrew and waited out most of the year 69 CE, known as the “Year of the Four Emperors” — when

he became the victorious final contender for the throne in Rome. His son Titus took over as the Roman commander against the Jewish rebels.

The Jews in Jerusalem had set up a government, minted coins inscribed for the freedom and deliverance of Zion, and dispatched Josephus to defend the north. As the Romans swept through the countryside, surviving radical messianic rebels came to Jerusalem, alongside other refugees, swelling its population to a quarter of a million (ten times its normal size, and about twice its size during the *shalosh regalim* (the three pilgrimage holidays). These were hardened veteran fighters, fortified by Jewish messianism — the belief that Hashem will stand with them through a messiah, a warrior prince to lead them to victory.

These rebels outmaneuvered and overwhelmed the wealthy class that dominated the government in Jerusalem and executed the High Priest Ananus, who served as its head of state. Then three rebel factions went to war against each other, even destroying a grain storage facility as they fought, knowing full well that the Romans would soon be upon them.

But miraculously, when the Romans came, they coalesced to defend the city. When Titus rode ahead of his army with a small cavalry guard to study Jerusalem's defenses, his party was suddenly attacked by Jewish fighters who came within a few feet of either killing or capturing this new Roman commander, son of the new emperor and a future emperor himself. What if they had captured him, one wonders?

The Jewish defense of Jerusalem was aggressive. It mostly consisted of surprise attacks by Jews springing from the city through hidden sally ports, with Romans suffering repeated tactical defeats. But the Romans, being Romans, reorganized and resumed their assault. The siege lasted over four months in the year 70.

The Jews defended three defensive walls, with the second and third walls fortified with high towers. After breaching the first wall, the Romans suffered another defeat when the Jews literally undermined the great siege machine that the Romans employed — digging a tunnel, igniting flammable materials which caused it to collapse, taking the Roman machine down with it, and then recapturing the ground they had lost between the walls. Later, even with hunger sapping their physical strength, the Jews fought the Romans to exhaustion in head-to-head massed formations at the Temple Mount.

Their defense broke only when a lone Roman legionnaire threw a small burning piece of wood which found its mark in a room rife with timber, olive oil and other flammable materials. The Jews were unable to both fight the spreading flames and defend against the Romans, and so the Temple fell. Jewish resistance in the city ended three weeks later and the Romans sacked the city mercilessly, killing tens of thousands and enslaving almost everyone else.

A few Jewish strongholds remained, with the last being Masada, whose story most of you know. Sixty years after this catastrophe, the Jews of Judea and environs again rose up against the Romans, retook Jerusalem, and held on for four years with a new revolutionary government under Bar Kochba — proclaimed to be the Messiah by the renowned rabbinical sage Akiva — only to meet the same catastrophic fate under the massive blows of four Roman legions.

Sometimes I wonder how different our history as Jews might have been if the Jews in the first rebellion had united under a single charismatic and capable leader like Bar Kochba. Or if the Jews had listened

to the Roman offers to surrender, as conveyed at least three times by Josephus outside of Jerusalem's walls.

The timing of events worked against the Jews, but one could imagine the needle threaded in their favor. What if Parthia, a Middle Eastern power that was Rome's only major external enemy at the time, had not concluded peace with Rome in 63 CE? And what if the Jewish communities of Alexandria, Cyprus and Cyrene had risen in revolt concurrently with the risings in Judea, rather than in the years 115-117, between the two great rebellions?

Would we have had a more normal trajectory as a nation with ancient roots in the same land? Would we not have produced the spiritual and intellectual genius associated with us as a minority living by our wits on sufferance among others? In other words, should we weigh having a more typical collective history as a nation against the remarkable contributions Jews have made as individuals coming from a small often-persecuted people living in the Diaspora?

Obviously, I'm making an assumption that is not necessarily valid, that the great intellectual and artistic achievements of our people — as represented by the huge disproportion of Nobel Prizes won by Jews (about 22% of the total of individual prizes between 1901 and 2021) — has something to do with our unique culture as a marginalized minority that values thought and study as much as it does.

I would have voted for a more normal national existence with fewer episodes of persecution and catastrophe. I'm undoubtedly influenced in this flight of fantasy by how devastated my family was by the Shoah, and how this affected my parents as refugees and survivors, who in turn passed on some of this trauma. But this takes us from the realm of history to alternate history and psychology.