

10 Things You Need to Know About Shimon bar Kokhba

1. Shimon bar Kokhba led a Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire in the years 132-135 CE.



Silver Coin Minted During The Bar Kokhba Revolt

2. Let's start with his name. We know his first name, Shimon, from coins minted at the time of the revolt. Likely, his surname was initially Bar Koseva. It is thought that this was changed, perhaps by Rabbi Akiva, to bar Kokhba at the time of the revolt.

Messianic hopes were high then, and it was said he descended, as was required by Jewish tradition, from the Davidic line. The reconfigured name read "son of a star," a reference to the prophecy in Numbers 24:17, "there shall step forth a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite through the corners of Moab." Later, when the revolt went down to stupendous failure, he was called bar Koziba, meaning "son of disappointment." Each change required the substitution of just one letter.

3. For three years he led the revolt as warrior and as executive (*Nasi*, or prince) of an independent Jewish state. He was a very charismatic, intelligent person, as well as a religiously observant and pious Jew. He had a great and sincere faith. This in combination with his charismatic personality produced a natural leader that captured the heart and soul of the Jewish people.

He was a person with such tremendous physical strength that he was able to uproot a tree while riding a horse and could also hold back a Roman catapult. His feats of personal valor were legendary, which all lent to a superhuman aura about him. The Talmud says that anyone who wanted to join his army had to be willing to cut off their little finger. However, the rabbis objected to such an act of self-mutilation, and therefore he resorted to the test of "simply" uprooting trees.

In the writings of Dio Cassius it says that he had an army of 200,000, each of whom was strong enough to uproot a tree. By any measure it was a large and fearsome Jewish army.

When he went into battle, he is said to have asked God for neither assistance nor discouragement, saying, "There is no need for You to assist us, but do not embarrass us either."

Letters written in his name during the war show not only his focus on the smallest issues of camp life, but also on issues relating to Jewish observance, including Shabbat, tithes and holidays. Archaeologist Yigael Yadin says that he also tried to revive Hebrew (Aramaic was the language spoken at that time) as the official language of his realm.

4. The rebellion broke out when the emperor Hadrian, who had initially been somewhat welcoming to the Jews, took increasingly hard measures against them. He appointed rulers who ravaged the population, interdicting religious practices such as circumcision, and starting to build a temple to Jupiter on the site of the destroyed Temple.

5. At first, success was rapid. Bar Kokhba's forces, including Jews and non-Jews, overran some fifty strongholds in Judea and 985 undefended towns and villages. Coins were minted with Bar Kokhba's name and slogans such as "the freedom of Israel." All told, Bar Kochba eventually mustered an army of almost 350,000. In the ancient world that was an enormous army, greater in number than the entire Roman army.

6. More Roman legions were dispatched to Judea. The Romans were so hard pressed that Hadrian brought his best general and all of his troops from England, Gaul, Germany and all of the provinces scattered throughout the Roman world. The reason was simple: Rome felt itself threatened as no other time. It was total war. Rather than waging open war, they set siege to the Jewish fortresses and villages, utilizing a scorched-earth policy that weakened the bodies and the will of the inhabitants. The tide of war turned, yet the Romans continued to take heavy casualties, too.

7. Bar Kokhba's headquarters in Beitar also housed the Sanhedrin. It was the vital center of the nation and a military stronghold strategically located on a

mountain ridge overlooking the road to Jerusalem. Here, after a bitter siege, the final battle was fought. When the Romans conquered the stronghold, they killed every Jew there, sparing just one youth, Simeon ben Gamliel. It was reported by the Roman consul and historian Cassius Dio (135-236 CE) that 580,000 Jews were killed in the war, not counting those who died of famine, disease and fire.

8. After 135 CE, when the rebellion was crushed, Hadrian acted even more ruthlessly and set about on a campaign to wipe away not only the remnants of the Jewish people but the memory that they had ever existed.

He realized that the solution to the Jewish problem lay not only in killing Jews but in destroying Judaism. As long as the Jews had their religion, no one would ever really be able to eradicate them entirely. Therefore, he issued decrees that outlawed Judaism on the pain of death.

The decrees of Hadrian were the most fearsome in history against the Jewish people. Teaching Torah was the worst “crime” a Jew could commit under these circumstances. Jewish tradition is rich with stories about the “10 Martyrs Murdered by the [Roman] Government.” It is during Hadrian’s reign that this happened. He was not content merely killing these great rabbis but doing it in public display of brutality and torture, hoping to crush the spirit of the Jewish people. Foremost among the martyrs was Rabbi Akiva.

9. Hadrian did not stop there. He forbade mention of the name Jerusalem and renamed the holy city, Aelia Capitolina. He also forbade Jews from living there. Most notable of all, he employed an army of slaves to plow over the Temple Mount. He simply lowered it almost 1,000 feet. When one goes to Jerusalem today, the mountains around the Temple Mount (such as the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus) are taller. Before Hadrian, however, Mount Moriah (the mountain upon which the Temple stood) was the highest mountain there. Hadrian literally reconstructed the landscape in order to prove to the Jews that it would never be rebuilt again. Judea, Galilee and Samaria were reconstituted as a single province, Syria Palaestina. Persecution of the Jews, and prohibition of religious practices, continued at an even higher pitch until the end of Hadrian’s reign in 138 CE.

10. In Israel, Jews remember Bar Kokhba on Lag B'Omer. On Lag B'Omer, it is believed by some, **Bar Kokhba's** army reconquered Jerusalem, and we celebrate that great event today. For four years Jewish independence was restored. Many believe that Bar Kokhba actually began to rebuild the Temple. Some even believe that he completed the building of the Third Temple. In modern times, Zionism connected Bar Kokhba with heroism in the face of overwhelming odds, and today in Israel the holiday continues to symbolize the Jewish fighting spirit.

MORE DETAILS ABOUT BAR KOKHBA IF YOU ARE INTERESTED.....

Only forty years after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews attempted to rebuild it –with the permission of the Roman government. The Emperor at the time was named Trajan and they negotiated with him at length to rebuild the Temple. However, he made certain conditions that were untenable, one of which was that it should be built in a different location. The Jews were naturally unable to accept such an idea, but they were also unable to explain to him why it was unacceptable and could only be built on that mountain in Jerusalem.

That led to the second of the three wars against the Romans. The first one lasted from 63 to 73 CE, culminating in the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem.

The second war took place in about 110 CE and was led by two brothers with Roman names, Pappus and Lulianus (the Roman name Julius or Julian). They made a strong effort to deliver the Jewish people from under the Roman yoke. Their main headquarters was in the city of Lod. The Romans pursued them and dealt with them very severely, massacring of all its inhabitants, including Pappus and Lulianus. The Romans thought they had now brought the matter to an end; that Judea was pacified once and for all.

Immediately after this war, Trajan was assassinated and succeeded by Hadrian. He, too, entertained ideas of allowing the Jews to rebuild the Temple and have a measure of autonomy. He felt that the destruction of Lod would guarantee that the Jews would not rebel again. However, he misread the situation.

A "Star" Emerges

The next war was led by one of the most enigmatic people to appear in Jewish history, a man whom we know very little and yet for the role he played we should know a great deal. His name was Shimon bar Kosiba.

What we do know about him is that he was a person of tremendous physical strength. He was able to uproot a tree while riding a horse. He was able to hold back a Roman catapult. His feats of personal valor were legendary, which all lent to a superhuman aura about him. The Talmud says that anyone who wanted to join his army had to be willing to cut off their little finger. However, the rabbis objected to such an act of self-mutilation, and therefore he resorted to the test of “simply” uprooting trees. In the writings of Dio Cassius it says that he had an army of 200,000, each of whom was strong enough to uproot a tree. By any measure it was a large and fearsome Jewish army.

He was a very charismatic, intelligent person, as well as a religiously observant and pious Jew. He had a great and sincere faith. This in combination with his charismatic personality produced a natural leader that captured the heart and soul of the Jewish people.

A “Star” Shines

Bar Kokhba said that the only way that the Jews would get anything from the Romans would be to take it by force. He, therefore, organized this very large army and began the rebellion against Rome, which lasted almost six years. During four of those years there was an independent Jewish state.

Bar Kochba followed the same strategy that the Jews had followed in the first rebellion against Rome. He first reconquered the Galilee to cut the Romans off from the sea. Then he surrounded Jerusalem and forced them out.

He had active support of most of the rabbis – in contradistinction to the first two revolts against Rome. In those instances, the rabbis were at best neutral. In this war, the most influential rabbi lent his name to the cause, was Akiva ben Joseph.

It was Rabbi Akiva who ascribed to Shimon bar Kochba the famous messianic verse: “A star will shoot forth from Jacob” (Numbers 24:17). That is how he got the name “Kochba,” which means “star.” In essence, Rabbi Akiva crowned him the Messiah. Rabbi Akiva was so widely respected among the people that if he saw in Shimon messianic qualities then the people immediately elevated him to the level of the Messiah. This helps us understand very well why the Christians would take no part in the war; it would have made one messiah too many.

Shimon bar Kochba’s reputation became so great that, according to the records of the times, many non-Jews came to fight in his army. They saw it as a real chance to bring down the Roman Empire. Many people were not very happy with the Romans and their ways.

All told, Bar Kochba eventually mustered an army of almost 350,000. In the ancient world that was an enormous army, greater in number than the entire Roman army. The Romans were so hard pressed that Hadrian brought his best general and all of his troops from England, Gaul, Germany and all of the provinces scattered throughout the Roman world. The reason was simple: Rome felt itself threatened as no other time. It was total war.

Many details of the war are unclear to us. We know that at one point Bar Kochba took back Jerusalem and proclaimed that he was going to rebuild the Temple, which was one of the steps the Messiah was supposed to do according to prophecy and tradition. However, due to Roman pressure and internal dissention he apparently never got to actually rebuilding it. By the third year of his reign there were already signs of disenchantment.

A “Star” Fades and Burns Out

After a string of almost unbroken successes for four to five years. Bar Kochba now began to suffer reverses. As the pressure of Rome bore down upon him, he began to worry about betrayal and was on the lookout for spies. However, he looked in the wrong places. He felt that the rabbis had turned against him.

This happened while he commanded a very large force at the city Beitar, which was the key to Jerusalem. Today there are a number of archaeological sites that could be Beitar, which was the location of the last great battle of this war, but the exact site is not known conclusively. In either event, the Jews were so well-fortified and supplied they could have held out at Beitar indefinitely. Had they done so, the Romans, who were constantly harassed by guerilla warfare and marauding Jewish soldiers, would have retreated.

However, Beitar was betrayed. Its secret fortifications and entrances were revealed to the Romans by insiders — but not the rabbis, as Bar Kochba feared. Yet, in a fit of almost insane paranoia Bar Kochba accused the great sage, Rabbi Elazar, of being the spy and executed him. He then lost the support of the rabbis completely. It eroded all chance of reconciliation. Then they began calling him, “Bar Koziba,” meaning the son of a lie; a false messiah. Their hopes were dashed.

Beitar fell to the Romans on Tisha B’Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, in 135 CE, adding it to calamitous national tragedies of the Jewish people. Bar Kochba was eventually killed in battle. According to Dio Cassius and Jewish sources, at least a half a million Jews were killed. It was a tremendous blood bath.

Hadrian’s Final Solution

After 135 CE, when the rebellion was crushed, Hadrian acted even more ruthlessly and set about on a campaign to wipe away not only the remnants of the Jewish people but the memory that they had ever existed. In effect, he decided to “solve the Jewish problem” once and for all.

He realized that the solution to the Jewish problem lay not only in killing Jews but in destroying Judaism. As long as the Jews had their religion, no one would ever really be able to eradicate them entirely. Therefore, he issued decrees that outlawed Judaism on the pain of death.

The decrees of Hadrian were the most fearsome in history against the Jewish people. Teaching Torah was the worst “crime” a Jew could commit under these circumstances. Jewish tradition is rich with stories about the “10 Martyrs Murdered by the [Roman] Government.” It is during Hadrian’s reign that this happened. He was not content merely killing these great rabbis but doing it in public display of brutality and torture, hoping to crush the spirit of the Jewish people.

Foremost among the martyrs was Rabbi Akiva. Hadrian did not stop there. He forbade mention of the name Jerusalem and renamed the holy city, Aelia Capitolina. He also forbade Jews from living there. Most notable of all, he employed an army of slaves to plow over the Temple Mount. He simply lowered it almost 1,000 feet. When one goes to Jerusalem today, the mountains around the Temple Mount (such as the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus) are taller. Before Hadrian, however, Mount Moriah (the mountain upon which the Temple stood) was the highest mountain there. Hadrian literally reconstructed the landscape in order to prove to the Jews that it would never be rebuilt again.

Overall, Hadrian unleashed an eight to ten-year reign of persecution after the defeat of Bar Kochba almost unmatched in Jewish history. It did not end until Hadrian died. His successor, Antoninus Pious, not only overturned his decrees but was very benevolent toward the Jews. Even so, the Jewish people after Hadrian were crushed almost beyond recognition. Bar Kochba’s defeat marked the end of any sort of Jewish autonomy in the Jewish homeland until the twentieth century.