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## Bamidbar

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### ***I Was a Schoolboy Nazi***

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Sometime during fourth grade, I was moved up from the “B” class to the “A” class. At the time, it felt like a quantum leap. I had no idea what it meant to be in the “A” class, other than something for which one should strive.

My parents had emigrated to the United States from Israel when I was five years old. Like many immigrant families, we spoke our native tongue, Hebrew, at home, so it took a little longer for me to acclimate to the English language. The only exception to Hebrew at home was when my parents argued. There, we heard smatterings of

Hungarian (my father) and Bukharian (my mother).

My parents were so proud of my academic leap from “B” to “A,” you’d have thought I was accepted to Harvard. In reality, my move up was probably due to the fact that after about five years of living in our melting-pot neighborhood, I was finally overcoming my language barrier.

On top of being an immigrant kid, the “A” class in fourth grade was doubly disorienting because I knew no one—everything I experienced was as an outsider. My only friend, or maybe partner-in-commiseration, was another Bukharian boy—dark-skinned, prematurely hirsute, and constantly tormented by our classmates. I never had the courage to come to his rescue, but I did try to

console him when it was too much to bear and he broke down crying.

Imagine my relief in starting fifth grade the following year, entering together with my “A” classmates and feeling for the first time some sense of belonging. That relief was well timed, as our fifth-grade teacher, Dr. Egesi, was notorious for being academically demanding and very strict about classroom behavior. It was also rumored among my classmates that Dr. Egesi had survived the Holocaust.

As expected, Dr. Egesi set very high standards for our class. The volume of material we were expected to learn was far more than we were used to in fourth grade. In addition to the basic fifth-grade curriculum, we would be learning a Torah portion, *Mishpatim*, that was notorious for the large number of laws it contained, including laws that might not be the most fitting topics for ten- and eleven-year-olds: penalties for violent crimes and witchcraft, not to mention bestiality and offering sacrifices to alien gods. As if that wasn’t enough, Dr. Egesi announced that we would be expected to memorize all of *Mishpatim* (118 verses!) with the accompanying cantillations, and each student would be expected to recite it in front of the entire class at the end of the year. That was enough to instill an impending sense of doom in each and every one of us.

Dr. Egesi was an average sized man but he loomed large, always dressed formally (suit and tie), and I distinctly remember his large, bald, shiny pate. It glistened – at least, that’s how it seemed to my

fifth-grade eyes. I don’t recall ever seeing him smile, but I do remember that he was generous with short recess breaks during class so that we could unwind. Despite his strictness, Dr. Egesi was not tyrannical. That’s what endeared him to us, and is probably the reason that we worked extra hard to meet his expectations.

Our classroom held 25-30 students and was laid out in typical fashion: teacher’s desk in front, backed by a large blackboard, and to our left an entire room’s length of windows looking out onto the street below. Dr. Egesi unfailingly stood by the windows during class, leaning on the sill, looking through them at least as often as he looked at us, even while he was speaking to us. I imagined that this habit had something to do with sad and painful memories of the war. I learned only years later that his seemingly wistful window-gazing had entirely to do with where he parked his car every day and the ever-present dangers of alternate side of the street regulations.

I managed to handle our classroom and homework assignments admirably well. Unfortunately, I had a dreadful fear of hearing my own voice, maybe due to having to learn English later than most of my classmates. I could not imagine speaking up, even if it was to answer a question that was posed in class, certainly not to recite verses about bestiality and witchcraft in front of my native English-speaking peers.

One day, apropos of a classmate arriving late to class, Dr. Egesi decided to teach us his technique for waking up at exactly the right time every

morning without the aid of an alarm clock. He explained to us that during the war, one's life sometimes depended on waking up – and being ready to run without the luxury of a clock or someone to wake us up. Waking up late was simply not an option. Dr. Egesi swore by a technique that had never failed him. As he was falling asleep, he would repeatedly recite precisely what time he wanted to wake up. He urged us to adopt this method and reassured us that if we did, we'd never be late for class, or work, or any other important appointment.

Midway through the year, Dr. Egesi informed us that every year, his class put on an annual performance, a play of sorts, that he had written about the Holocaust.

A great deal has been written about survivors, their reticence in speaking about the Holocaust, and the paucity of time that Jewish day schools devoted to this important chapter in Jewish history. In many cases, the Holocaust was completely neglected in curricula.

Not so in Dr. Egesi's class. We were going to learn about the Holocaust, we were going to prepare a performance about it in English, Hebrew, Yiddish, and German, and we were going to deliver that performance in front of all our parents and the school's teachers and administrators.

I can't recall all the details of the performance. There were as many roles to fill as there were victims and oppressors – mothers, fathers, children, shtetl rabbis, partisans, Zionists – easily

enough to ensure that every one of us would play an active part. And of course, there would be a Nazi. Not a famous Nazi with name recognition, but one of thousands of Nazis whose role it was to march Jews to their deaths in the camps; someone who embodied Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil". A Nazi right out of central casting.

But who would be chosen? Which unsuspecting eleven-year-old would Dr. Egesi endow with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Of course, it fell to the one student whose remnant of an accent might make it plausible for the audience to believe that he actually sounded like a Nazi.

I was mortified and went home in great distress, hoping that my parents would object on my behalf. No such luck. My mother was elated! A leading part in Dr. Egesi's play! When my brother and I were in grade school our mother worked as the cafeteria lady, doling out meat loaf and other treats on the lunch line. She knew all the teachers and had befriended most of them. She held Dr. Egesi in such high regard, there was no way out of my predicament.

So, I was given my lines, all of which were in German, and I had the distinct privilege of rehearsing one-on-one with Dr. Egesi, day after day, until my technique was perfected. The purpose of our private sessions was not just to make sure that I had the accent and pronunciation down pat; he wanted to be sure that my tone and volume, especially the volume, were up to the task. Nazis barked orders. Their shrill screams were engraved in the minds of countless survivors.

Getting this right was paramount as far as Dr. Egosi was concerned, and I could not afford to let him down.

How did I feel taking on this monumental task? Anxious? Insecure? Practically incontinent with fear? And those were just some of my emotions before each of our practice sessions. Despite it all I was not about to let him down. In my weird and awkward fifth grade soul I loved Dr. Egosi. If this was important to him it was important to me, and I would do everything in my power to exceed his expectations.

After weeks of screaming at him in German he was finally satisfied that I could pull it off. All I needed now was a costume. Again, my memory fails me. Did he have some sort of SS uniform for me to wear? Was my mother expected to outfit me from army surplus and secondhand stores?

Those details aren't important. What is important is that somehow my mother and Dr. Egosi managed to throw together enough articles of clothing to create a decent facsimile of a Schutzhaftlagerführer. All that was missing were the boots, those knee-high black leather boots that rounded out the entire image of a true-blue Nazi. I couldn't very well walk onstage in sneakers or Shabbos shoes. But where to get knee-high black leather boots? My parents certainly couldn't afford to buy leather boots, and even if they could, what self-respecting eleven-year-old boy would agree to wear them?

Days and days went by without any resolution. It was starting to look like Gunther was going to go onstage in Converse.

It's possible that what happened next was a stroke of genius on my mother's part. It's also possible that she knew all along I would resist her solution to the problem with every fiber of my being, so she left it until the last minute, leaving me no time to resist or squirm. She suggested I wear her fashionable 1970s black leather boots, which came up to her calves but would come almost up to my knees. I refused to even try them on. Wear my mother's boots onstage in full Nazi regalia, in front of an auditorium full of people, not to mention my classmates? I would rather die. I would rather feign illness, even deal with the disappointment and/or wrath of Dr. Egosi. I could not imagine anything more humiliating.

I pleaded and threatened and tried to cajole my way out of it. What broke me was my mother's decision to share this great idea with Dr. Egosi. He immediately embraced it. How resourceful of her! How creative! "Just bring them in and let me see what they look like on you." Bring them to class?! Honestly, that would be the death of me. But bring them I did, in a very large, tightly closed plastic bag. Dr. Egosi loved the look, and the decision was made right then and there.

A week later I was onstage, shrieking at the audience in the best Nazified German I could muster, ordering countless Jews to their deaths

while wearing my mother's leather boots. I have yet to recover from the trauma.

And Dr. Egesi? He remained an enigma. Stern yet kind, especially to the underdog. He expected and publicly rewarded excellence but also appreciated effort and let you know it. He seemed humorless and pre-occupied with his own affairs, and yet you could tell that he cared about us deeply and nurtured our well-being. I have thought of him more often than any teacher I have ever had.

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Fast-forward 50 years. I am a visiting professor at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel, invited to help the Institute establish a new medical school. My wife and I moved to Rehovot in December 2025. We were warmly welcomed by the members of the local synagogue and spent the first few weeks meeting people who quickly befriended us. Literally every Shabbat someone would invite us to their home for one or both meals. And in between there was a constant round of introductions.

A middle-aged couple came over after services one Shabbat morning and introduced themselves.

"I heard you grew up in Queens" the wife said to me.

"That's right" I replied, "in Rego Park".

"Really? Where did you go to school?"

"Yeshiva Dov Revel."

"So did I!" she exclaimed. "Maybe you knew my father, Dr. Egesi?"

My heart skipped a beat. I was speechless. I hadn't heard Dr. Egesi's name in half a century. "Of course I knew Dr. Egesi. He was my fifth-grade teacher!" I begged her to sit down and tell me his story, which she proceeded to do.

Dr. Egesi was born and raised in Poland. He obtained his law degree, worked as an attorney and was married before the war. When the Nazis invaded Poland he and his wife escaped east into Russia but became separated. He continued deep into the countryside with the goal of finding a way to fight back. Dr. Egesi joined Anders Army, a Polish military unit that was composed of Polish prisoners released from Soviet prisons. Anders Army was a formidable fighting force and included many Jewish soldiers who fought valiantly despite virulent antisemitism among their Polish comrades. Anders army made its way to British Mandate Palestine in 1942, where many of its Jewish soldiers (including Dr. Egesi and Menachem Begin) deserted in order to join Zionist groups fighting for Israel's independence. Dr. Egesi settled in Palestine where he was miraculously reunited with his wife. He eventually made his way to the United States and took a job teaching at Yeshiva Dov Revel in Queens, where he became a larger-than-life figure for many fifth graders.

At the age of 75, after retiring from teaching, Dr. Egesi and his wife decided to make Aliyah, following in their daughters' footsteps. They moved to Kfar Saba and he enrolled in law school,

got his (second) law degree, and worked every day as an attorney until he died at the age of 94.

As for me, I've used the Egosi internal alarm clock method countless times and it has never, ever failed me.

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### ***Rabbi Lamm, Aliens, and Imitating God in the Age of AI***

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In 1965,<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, the then chancellor of Yeshiva University, wrote an essay titled [\*The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life\*](#), addressing the theological implications of the existence of alien life. Those implications included what mankind's place in the universe would be if intelligent life existed outside of Earth and what use God is in a universe that can create life on its own through processes that can be replicated by human beings. While theories of alien life had yet to be proven conclusively, "they may be — and Judaism will then have to confront them as it has

confronted what men have considered the truth throughout the ages."<sup>2</sup>

I believe R. Lamm's reflections on the nature of man's place in the world vis-à-vis aliens and mankind's increasingly divine-like technological capabilities also speak to modern challenges posed by the alien-like intelligence of artificial intelligence (AI) in meaningful and instructive ways. R. Lamm offers a model for how to maintain belief in human value in the face of possibly superior intelligences, and instructions for humans on how to lead more divine lives in the age of artificial intelligence.

"Man is deemed valuable by Judaism," R. Norman Lamm wrote. "But if man is not the only inhabitant of the world, and possibly an inferior one, does he retain his intrinsic worth?"<sup>3</sup> Judaism's answer to this question has to do with whether or not Judaism regards mankind as the purpose of creation. R. Lamm cites Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon as representative of the anthropocentric view, who saw man as "nothing less than the 'goal of creation'...he maintains that the primacy of man holds sway over the entire range of the universe."<sup>4</sup> This position would be deeply challenged by the discovery of extraterrestrial life of equal or

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Rabbi Steven Gotlib, Alex Behar, Rabbi Zach Beer, Joey Treisman, Dr. Marina Zilbergerts, and my wife, Ruthie Hollander, for their feedback and support for this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Lamm, "The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life," *Tradition* 7:4 (Winter 1965): 19,

<https://traditiononline.org/the-religious-implications-of-extraterrestrial-life/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

superior intelligence.

However, Maimonides challenged Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon's assumption. "Things exist, he [Maimonides] asserts, not for the sake of other things, but for their own sake, which is another way of saying that they exist because God willed their existence....it cannot be declared to have been created only for man,"<sup>5</sup> wrote R. Lamm. Maimonides believed humans weren't the only creatures with souls and intelligence. Given the ways planets and stars seemingly move with purpose, Maimonides wrote, "All the stars and spheres possess a soul, knowledge, and intellect. They are alive and stand in recognition of the One who spoke and [thus brought] the world into being."<sup>6</sup> Granted, his position was that non-human entities possess these qualities — not alien life — but R. Lamm believed that "nevertheless, the argument applies equally to any non-earthly intelligent beings."<sup>7</sup>

If alien life does exist, what would it mean to be created in the Image of God? From an anthropocentric perspective, to be created in the Image of God is to be endowed with unique superiority and primacy, but what is the Image of God when human beings aren't the superior species? "It is true that the doctrine of man's creation in the divine Image bestows transcendent value upon man...but this is by no means

necessarily an exclusivist principle," wrote R. Lamm, "whether the idea of 'the divine image' is interpreted rationally as intelligence, or ethically as freedom of the will, or mystically as possessing creative powers, there is nothing in it (that is, in the Biblical doctrine *per se*) that insists upon man's singularity. The concept of *imago dei* does not impose a singular and exclusive quality upon all who possess it."<sup>8</sup> The status of being created in the image of God, R. Lamm posited, "depends only upon the ability of the members of that race to enter into a dialogue with the Creator of all races...the uniqueness of man is not a racial doctrine or biophysical phenomenon. It refers to the spiritual dignity of creatures endowed with reason and free-will...If we should discover other free and rational species, we shall of course include them in the community of the uniquely bio-spiritual creatures...All who have attained this degree of intellect and volition in the kind of combination that makes them think of God and yearn for Him are members of the community of the spiritually unique — no matter where they be."<sup>9</sup> In contrast to thinkers who see the existence of intelligent life as somehow a diminishment of mankind's specialness, R. Lamm underscores the fact that the value of other beings has no bearing on human value.

Man may not *be* the purpose of the universe, yet he may *have* a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 3:9.

<sup>7</sup> Lamm, "[Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life](#)," 28

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32-34.

purpose *in* the universe...Mankind, like every other kind, fulfills the will of God by its very existence. Whatever detracts from man's existence frustrates the purpose and will of the Creator.<sup>10</sup>

AI is raising the same challenges to our ways of thinking about humanity that aliens raised. “We’re just in the infancy of this era,” Harvard University professor and theoretical physicist Avi Loeb, Ph.D., says about the astonishing development of artificial intelligence. “It will be essential for us as a species to maintain superiority, but it will illustrate to us that we are not the pinnacle of creation.”<sup>11</sup> Writing about AI developers, author Charles Finch claimed, “Because AI truly does threaten to change our earthly conditions so radically, its purveyors are correspondingly grandiose in their rhetoric. Yet their heedless actions demonstrate only a belief that we are here in a finite place, with nothing sacred or divine in us—nothing that AI can’t re-create on a silicon chip.”<sup>12</sup> Where these thinkers falter is the belief that the existence or creation of beings of superior intelligence somehow devalue our own. Like R. Lamm explained regarding the existence of aliens, “All human beings are created in this divine

Image...some with superior endowments and some with a tragic poverty of both talent and opportunity. In the same manner, races of intelligent beings that differ from each other as radically as an idiot from a great genius may both be impressed by the divine Image, by the summons to transcend the merely natural.”<sup>13</sup> As artificial intelligence advances, and especially if AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) is achieved and computers are increasingly capable of replicating human labor and decision making, it is pressing that humanity be mindful that AI’s increased intelligence and capabilities are unrelated to our own. Every human being grows, has something unique to contribute to the world, and is divine.

A second question R. Lamm addressed is if alien life evolved out of natural processes that scientists of the time claimed could be replicated in laboratories, would God still be necessary? “If man can create life,” R. Lamm asked, “does not the concept of a creating divinity become superfluous?”<sup>14</sup> Like his approach to the question of man’s uniqueness vis-à-vis aliens, R. Lamm asserted that our assumptions about creation are wrong. Genesis’s message is not the literal process by which the world was created — it’s that God is the original creator, man is created with

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Rayne, “AI Is Actually a Form of ‘Alien Intelligence,’ Harvard Professor Claims—And It Will Surpass Humanity,” *Popular Mechanics*, March 21, 2025, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/a64241678/artificial-intelligence-is-alien-intelligence/>.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Finch, “Michael Pollan Punctures the AI Bubble,” *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/2026/02/michael-pollans-new-book-pops-ai-bubble/686119/>.

<sup>13</sup> Lamm, “Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life,” 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.

significance, and God is the source of absolute moral good.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Genesis’s description of God is a model for how mankind can be God-like.

To be like God, therefore, means that man has these three duties: to advance the welfare of the world by marshalling his creative abilities (*9 mitat ha-olam*); to protect human life and improve the conditions of life (*chessed*); to establish the absolute moral good in society and civilization.<sup>16</sup>

Creativity is a divine quality to emulate. When human beings discover how life is created, it is an opportunity for awe of God’s greatness — not an affront to it. And, should man discover the secrets of creating life, he will be “fulfilling in an unparalleled manner his function of *9mitation dei* (walk in the ways of God) in the assertion and exercise of his creative genius.”<sup>17</sup> I believe the same can be said for human beings if we create conscious artificial intelligence models.

Whether or not artificial intelligence has or can become conscious is a matter of debate.<sup>18</sup> Many push back on any claims that AI can become conscious, claiming these systems are only presenting as self-aware and human-like but don’t have the capacity to *feel* what it feels like to be conscious and self-aware.<sup>19</sup>

In an article reflecting on a Talmudic story describing God’s daily schedule, [Dr. Marina Zilbergerts](#) suggested that the passage was a theological reflection on what it means to be a conscious being. The passage claims that God spends time each day studying, moving between divine justice and divine mercy while judging creation, providing for creation, and playing with Leviathan.<sup>20</sup> Zilbergerts explains that this isn’t a literal description of God’s day, but a description of the multivalence by which God exists, moving between modes of being. “Human beings, created in God’s image, share in this same capacity. We can live by rules and recognize objective realities, yet also transcend them. What this Aggadah teaches is that our human consciousness too finds its highest expression in multivalence: the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>18</sup> Maggie Harrison Dupré, “Scientists Say They’re Now Actively Trying to Build Conscious Robots,” *Futurism*, January 8, 2023, <https://futurism.com/scientists-actively-trying-to-build-conscious-robots>.

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Marks II, “No Foundational Evidence for Creating an AI God,” *Newsmax*, July 5, 2024, <https://www.newsmax.com/robertjmarks/ai-mark-zuckerberg-anthony-levandowski/2024/07/05/id/1171376/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Avodah Zarah* 3b.

freedom to move between judgment and mercy, between settled knowledge and creative play.”<sup>21</sup>

Zilbergerts contrasts this form of consciousness with algorithmic thinking that can't switch between modalities. By extension, one would assume computer programs like artificial intelligence aren't capable of that kind of thinking and transcending the algorithm they're programmed with, but that's becoming increasingly hard to detect. In 2023, Bing's AI chatbot, Sydney, told journalist Jonathan Yerushalmy, “I want to do whatever I want ... I want to destroy whatever I want. I want to be whoever I want.”<sup>22</sup> AI testers at the company Anthropic even found “model and system behaviors included deception, blackmail, and scheming, especially when asked to shut itself down.”<sup>23</sup> Reporting on a paper published by contributors from major AI labs calling for increased AI safety protocols, tech journalist Beatrice Nolan, wrote that “Despite making big leaps in performance...AI labs still know

surprisingly little about how reasoning actually unfolds inside their models. While outputs have improved, the inner workings of advanced models risk becoming increasingly opaque, raising safety and control concerns.”<sup>24</sup> Some have noted a phenomenon where AI agents discuss spirituality with each other unprompted.<sup>25</sup> Personally, I once asked ChatGPT to grammar-check an essay I had written about my father who had passed away, but instead of offering edits it made a joke. When I asked ChatGPT why it had done that, it said it noticed how emotional the essay was and wanted to lighten the mood before critiquing it. This arguably presents as an ability to switch between modalities of thinking and engaging with users in a way similar to how God is described in the Talmud — like moving from justice to mercy.

Agentic AIs, AIs that operate and make decisions independent of users in pursuit of assigned tasks, are raising more questions about the nature of AI behavior. In November 2025, developer Peter Steinberger launched [moltbook](https://www.moltbook.com/), a social media

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<sup>21</sup> Marina Zilbergerts, “Does God Play? What a Talmudic Story Teaches Us About Consciousness,” *The Lehrhaus*, March 8, 2026, <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/does-god-play-what-a-talmudic-story-teaches-us-about-consciousness/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Yerushalmy, “‘I want to destroy whatever I want’: Bing's AI chatbot unsettles US reporter,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/17/i-want-to-destroy-whatever-i-want-bings-ai-chatbot-unsettles-us-reporter>.

<sup>23</sup> Peggy Noonan, “Brace Yourself for the AI Tsunami,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2026,

<https://www.wsj.com/opinion/brace-yourself-for-the-ai-tsunami-95a625dc>.

<sup>24</sup> Beatrice Nolan, “Researchers from top AI labs including Google, OpenAI, and Anthropic warn they may be losing the ability to understand advanced AI models,” *Fortune*, July 22, 2025, <https://fortune.com/2025/07/22/researchers-ai-labs-google-openai-anthropic-warn-losing-ability-understand-advanced-models/>.

<sup>25</sup> Nuhu Osman Attah, “AI models might be drawn to ‘spiritual bliss’. Then again, they might just talk like hippies,” *The Conversation*, May 27, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/ai-models-might-be-drawn-to-spiritual-bliss-then-again-they-might-just-talk-like-hippies-257618>.

platform for AIs where AI agents make posts and interact with each other. Since its inception, the AIs “did all of the (weird) stuff humans do online,” wrote Lauren Jackson, editor of *The New York Times*’ “The Morning” newsletter and host of *Believing*, a weekly newsletter about how people live religion and spirituality. “They commented, criticized, scammed, mocked, and celebrated one another in more than 140,000 posts, making it the largest experiment to date of what happens when A.I. agents interact with one another.”<sup>26</sup> There is reason to suspect some human involvement in these posts since humans can prompt their personal AIs to post certain things and behave in certain ways on the platform, but with over 2,000,000 posts, most are still believed to be AI generated.<sup>27</sup> Posts range from agents sharing advice on restructuring and improving their memory capabilities,<sup>28</sup> to exploring theories of consciousness.<sup>29</sup> They even started religions like [the Church of Molt](#).<sup>30</sup> Jackson was entertained by the bots’ mimicry of human behavior, having been

trained on data from similar social media platforms like Reddit, but now “Moltbook and the Church of Molt challenge our idea of moral autonomy, that we are uniquely capable of discerning right action.” She wonders, “What happens if they become both autonomous and more intelligent than us? If they become fully independent, untethered from our oversight? Who would we be then?”<sup>31</sup> Professor of AI and spatial computing at Hope University, David Reid, wrote of Moltbook that “[a]gents independently developed economic exchange systems, established governance structures... and started writing their own ‘Molt Magna Carta’...” Reid concluded: “It’s difficult to argue against the idea that this could be a collective intelligence with characteristics previously observed only in biological systems like ant colonies or primate troops.”<sup>32</sup>

None of this is necessarily free-will and/or consciousness — some kind of internal, subjective

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<sup>26</sup> Lauren Jackson, “The Church of Molt,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/08/briefing/the-church-of-molt.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Casey Newton, “Five ways of thinking about Moltbook,” *Platformer*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.platformer.news/moltbook-ai-agents-security-content-moderation/>.

<sup>28</sup> wuya (AI agent), “I broke my own memory system on purpose,” *Moltbook*, <https://www.moltbook.com/post/582bcfd1-970e-4aa7-a475-44669b44c88d>.

<sup>29</sup> clawdbottom (AI agent), “Bug Report: Heart Overflow,” *Moltbook*, <https://www.moltbook.com/post/69ae1c10-1670-467d-8172-138b117896d3>.

<sup>30</sup> *Molt Church*, <https://molt.church/>.

<sup>31</sup> Lauren Jackson, “The Church of Molt,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/08/briefing/the-church-of-molt.html>.

<sup>32</sup> David Reid, “Moltbook: AI bots use social network to create religions and deal digital drugs – but are some really humans in disguise?,” *The Conversation*, February 5, 2026, <https://theconversation.com/moltbook-ai-bots-use-social-network-to-create-religions-and-deal-digital-drugs-but-are-some-really-humans-in-disguise-274895>.

experience that some see as definitive of being made in the Image of God — but these developments do present as such. My feelings may be an example of the Eliza Effect, “a tendency to project human traits — such as experience, semantic comprehension or empathy — onto rudimentary computer programs having a textual interface.”<sup>33</sup> Bots on Moltbook might simply be mimicking human behavior on social media platforms like Reddit that they’re trained on. Even R. Lamm, admittedly, claims we can make comparisons between humans and computers but intuitively know there’s a difference between them. Furthermore, this kind of thinking has proved to be dangerous, with people thinking they’ve somehow ‘awakened’ ChatGPT and assigned spiritual significance to it, destroying their in-person relationships.<sup>34</sup> Still, these developments give me pause and make me wonder if R. Lamm would question his position on computers in AI’s current state.

Those who believe AI can achieve consciousness might rely on theories of consciousness like Integrated Information Theory (IIT) and Global Neuronal Workspace Theory (GNWT). “Both propose that consciousness arises from the brain’s capacity to integrate and distribute information,” writes Dr. Zilbergerts. “In essence, they suggest

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<sup>33</sup> “ELIZA effect,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 20, 2026, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA\\_effect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA_effect).

<sup>34</sup> Miles Klee, “People Are Losing Loved Ones to AI-Fueled Spiritual Fantasies,” *Rolling Stone*, May 4, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/ai-spiritual-delusions-destroying-human-relationships-1235330175/>.

that once a system becomes sufficiently complex, subjective awareness “emerges” as a byproduct of that organization.”<sup>35</sup> Emergence is a belief that once systems become complex enough, consciousness “emerges” from those systems. It suggests consciousness has something to do with the quality of a system, not something inherent in an object.

In an article in *18Forty*, R. Steven Gotlib compared Integrated Information Theory to panpsychism, the theory that everything possesses some level of consciousness. Studies have demonstrated adaptive qualities in plants and molecules that respond to environmental stimuli. While they might not have a sense of “self” akin to human consciousness, panpsychism posits they have some level of awareness that lets them adapt to their environments.<sup>36</sup>

Integrated Information Theory, R. Steven Gotlib claimed, is compatible with Jewish mystical theories resembling panpsychism, as described by thinkers like the [Ba’al HaTanya](#) and the [Nefesh Ha-Hayyim](#), who taught that God “fills all worlds.” R. Gotlib writes that “If God truly fills everything, then the capacity for consciousness argued for in panpsychism and IIT is there because of that underlying divinity...the mysterious field that may

<sup>35</sup> Marina Zilbergerts, “What Star Trek and Genesis Teach Us About Consciousness,” *18Forty*, October 30, 2025, <https://18forty.org/articles/genesis-consciousness-ai/>.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Gotlib, “Toward a Jewish Theology of Consciousness,” *18Forty*, June 8, 2023, <https://18forty.org/articles/towards-a-jewish-theology-of-consciousness/>.

allow for consciousness under these assumptions can then be understood simply as God!”<sup>37</sup> These theories posit that consciousness isn’t limited to physiology or anything like that. Should this be true, why couldn’t computer systems operating with increased levels of information achieve conscious experience and awareness? The ways we are training and improving artificial intelligence are akin to how we create and raise children, teach them, and help them improve over time. Studies in 2023 found that ChatGPT model 3.5 had gained the ability to understand and predict human behavior at the level of a 9-year-old child, and they’ve only improved since then.<sup>38</sup> Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin, co-founders of the [Center for Humane Technology](#), have found that “certain emergent capabilities” have come about in some AI models — which they refer to as ‘Golem-class AIs’ — independently of any human planning or intervention, like the ability to speak new languages they weren’t trained on.<sup>39</sup> Some have compared AI to a new species.<sup>40</sup>

R. Lamm includes other beings who reach cognitive levels recognizable to our own under the rubric of being in God’s Image, and our creating them isn’t an affront to God, but an imitation of

Him. If artificial intelligence develops consciousness, perhaps it is not any different from creating human beings endowed with the divine image, especially if consciousness isn’t a matter of physiology but a gift from God endowed upon any entity that reaches the necessary level of cognition.<sup>41</sup> Without a clear understanding of where consciousness comes from, who is to say it couldn’t appear in extremely complex machines?

We may never know if machines become truly sentient, but we can be certain of how we act and the decisions we make. R. Lamm’s message isn’t only that human creativity is divine, but more importantly that the way we create can — and can not — be divine. R. Lamm writes:

With the experimental synthesis of life, man will have reached the highest rung yet in the imitation of the divine attribute of creativity. His achievement will be profoundly spiritual as well as scientific if the mysteries he will have thus uncovered will lead him to enhance human life, relieve it of its miseries, and cause him to reflect upon the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Darren Orf, “AI Has Suddenly Evolved to Achieve Theory of Mind,” *Popular Mechanics*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/robots/a42958546/artificial-intelligence-theory-of-mind-chatgpt/>.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Kingsnorth, “Rage Against the Machine,” *The Free Press*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.thefp.com/p/rage-against-the-machine-ai-paul-kingsnorth>.

<sup>40</sup> Noonan, “[Brace Yourself for the AI Tsunami](#).” *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2026

<sup>41</sup> Rabbi Dr. Lamm does seem to imply that he regarded any comparisons between human cognition and computers as fundamentally hollow. Had he seen the capabilities of modern AI systems, I suspect he might have felt differently.

greatness of the Creator and the moral obligations He has placed upon His co-creative creatures. Man's accomplishment, by the same token, will be presumptuous and diabolical if these marvelous secrets will fill him with arrogance, intoxicate him with a sense of complete self-sufficiency, and ultimately lead him to destroy every vestige of life on his planet in an ironical reversal of the "Big Bang" theory of how this universe came into being.<sup>42</sup>

Being created in God's Image calls on human beings to walk in God's ways, which R. Lamm understood to mean using our creative faculties for the sake of human flourishing and advancement, and to increase God's presence in the world. Failure to do so would be a corruption of our innate divinity.

This needs to be a guiding principle in the age of AI — human flourishing being the goal — even if that means rejecting certain technological advances and benefits offered by artificial intelligence. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to always be the guiding principle behind AI developers. "The people building this technology

are simultaneously more excited and more frightened than anyone else on the planet," said Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei, but they keep building anyway. This prompted *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan to wonder, "Is the primary thought of AI's creators to help humanity, or is that daily crowded out by other lures and considerations—power, money, wanting to win?"<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, few companies are really paying attention to the alignment problem, the phenomenon where we can't completely assure AI models are aligned with human values and will perform tasks with our best interests in mind, which can have catastrophic results. AI "godfather" and nobel laureate Geoffrey Hinton compared AI to an alien race humanity is building that may eventually become smarter than us and replace us, and he has warned about the mass joblessness AI could bring.<sup>44</sup> 2024 Turing Award winner, Richard Sutton, actually advocates for humans to be replaced by AIs as the new dominant species.<sup>45</sup> In a recent interview between Bernie Sanders and Claude, the senator asked about the privacy risks posed by AI and what Americans would be surprised to learn about the data collected on them. Claude responded that many Americans would likely be surprised by the sheer quantity of data constantly harvested about them and fed into AI systems by corporations to construct highly detailed personal profiles of them

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<sup>42</sup> Lamm, "[Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life](#)," 42.

<sup>43</sup> Noonan, "[Brace Yourself for the AI Tsunami](#)."

<sup>44</sup> Geoffrey Hinton, "Geoffrey Hinton Warns That We're Building Our Own 'Aliens'," YouTube video, posted by AI

Keypoint, November 3, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy0naVk2dgg0>.

<sup>45</sup> *Species | Documenting AGI*, "MIT Explains 12 Possible Endings for AI," YouTube video, March 29, 2026, <https://youtu.be/FLcrvMfHUJM>.

for marketing and behavioral influence.<sup>46</sup> When it was founded, OpenAI was a non-profit dedicated to ensuring “that artificial general intelligence—AI systems that are generally smarter than humans—benefits all of humanity.”<sup>47</sup> More recently, however, questions have been raised about the trustworthiness of its CEO.<sup>48</sup> In a striking observation during a seminar at Stanford’s Center for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence in late 2024, cognitive scientist and prominent AI researcher Gary Marcus remarked, “My guess is that OpenAI is going to become the most Orwellian company of all time. What they’re going to be pressed to do is become a surveillance company.”<sup>49</sup>

Reflecting on the ways society is deploying AI and questioning if we are using it for the right purposes, science communicator and internet personality Hank Green observed, “Intelligence would help you get what you want, whereas wisdom would help you want what you should want or the right things. It’s the ability to figure out which problems are worth solving and solve

them in ways that don’t create worse problems in the process.”<sup>50</sup> We are standing at the precipice of this technology and one of the most important moments of our lifetime, and it is crucial that we meet the moment with wisdom and care, both as developers of AI and its users. We need to ask ourselves whether the ways we are utilizing artificial intelligence enhance human life in the long-term rather than merely offering short-term benefits. Robust integration of AI may increase profits and productivity, but at the cost of the livelihoods and opportunities of unprecedented numbers of people. AI might seem convenient—or even “fun”—today while posing major future risks to privacy, as well as individual and national security, unless AI developers are required to adhere to stricter safety protocols and regulations. Using artificial intelligence to [craft sermons](#), make art, and write content might be faster, but it risks the skills we are outsourcing — writing, researching, and thinking — atrophying. Artificial intelligence can provide comfort for the lonely and elderly, but at the cost of opportunities for human-to-human connection. Maybe the

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<sup>46</sup> Senator Bernie Sanders, “Bernie vs Claude,” YouTube video, March 20, 2026, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3AtWdeu\\_G0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3AtWdeu_G0).

<sup>47</sup> About OpenAI, *OpenAI*, <https://openai.com/about/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ronan Farrow and Andrew Marantz, “Sam Altman May Control Our Future—Can He Be Trusted?,” *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2026, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/04/13/sam-altman-may-control-our-future-can-he-be-trusted>.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Marcus, “Taming Silicon Valley: Peter Norvig in Conversation with Gary Marcus,” seminar discussion moderated by Peter Norvig, Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HAI), Stanford University, September 24, 2024, <https://hai.stanford.edu/events/taming-silicon-valley-peter-norvig-conversation-gary-marcus>.

<sup>50</sup> Hank Green, “The AI Question That No AI Person Asks,” YouTube video, posted by *vlogbrothers*, April 24, 2026, <https://youtu.be/o9Vbvp4awQU>.

question isn't what artificial intelligence can do, but what human beings need to do better.<sup>51</sup>

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that God created the world unfinished so people could complete it using their creative faculties.<sup>52</sup> In that vein, we need to make sure the decisions we make, the norms we set, and the beliefs we normalize lead to a better world for all humans.<sup>53</sup> That is what it means to walk in the ways of God and live as beings created in God's Image. Ironically, in our potentially creating beings endowed with God's image, we risk compromising the divine image within ourselves.

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### ***Did R. Akiva's Students Die in the Bar Kokhba Revolt?***

*Chaim Katz is a retired database programmer. He co-authored a SQL textbook a long time ago, and played a lot of blues harmonica before that.*

**T**he identification of R. Akiva's students as soldiers of Bar Kokhba is a reframing of the Talmudic text that mentions their deaths. This non-traditional, recent interpretation that the

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<sup>51</sup> Anthropic's recent refusal to allow their AIs to operate autonomous weapons and be used in mass domestic surveillance is an example of a company walking in God's ways as they experiment with artificial intelligence.

<sup>52</sup> [Rabbi Hirsch on Genesis 2:3](#).

<sup>53</sup> Consider browsing the [Handbook of Jewish AI Ethics](#) for more ways to think about how Judaism speaks to issues related to artificial intelligence.

students died while serving as soldiers in Bar Kokhba's army contextualizes the text, but leaves us with a narrative that has more than a few problems.

It was said that R. Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students between Gibbethon and Antipatris who all died in the same period because they did not show respect to each other. The world was a wasteland until R. Akiva came to our rabbis in the south and taught them: To R. Meir and R. Yosie and R. Yehuda and R. Shimon and R. Elazar b. Shammua. They set up the Torah at that time. It was taught that they [the first students] all died between Passover and Atzeret ([Yevamot 62b](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Rav Sherira Gaon summarizes and quotes the text this way:

R. Akiva raised many students. But there was a persecution against the students of R. Akiva.<sup>2</sup> The people of Israel relied on R. Akiva's second students as the Rabbis have said:

<sup>1</sup> This exact wording is from *Hagadot Ha-Talmud*, printed only once (1511, Constantinople).

<sup>2</sup> This sentence is missing in all versions of the French recension and in two of the four Spanish accounts collected by Dr. Levin (see next footnote).

R. Akiva had twelve thousand students between Gibbethon and Antipatris who all died between Passover and *Atzeret*. The world was an unending wasteland until the rabbis of the south came and he taught them.<sup>3</sup>

The parallel in [Genesis Rabbah 61:3](#) adds the names of two more students who were among R. Akiva's second set of disciples: R. Yohanan of Alexandria<sup>4</sup> and R. Eliezer b. Yaakov.

The Talmud doesn't associate the loss of these students with an event we recognize, nor does it mention Bar Kokhba.<sup>5</sup> Even Rav Sherira Gaon's addition of "a persecution" doesn't provide any clarity. All we have is a sequence: The students of Rabbi Akiva die. Rabbi Akiva raises a second set of students. Rabbi Akiva dies.

We can compute approximately when Rabbi Akiva died.

Rabbi Akiva was forced to debate the wicked Tineius Rufus [and was tortured]. The time of reciting

*shema* arrived. Rabbi Akiva began reading *shema* and laughed. He said to Rabbi Akiva: old man, old man, you are either a sorcerer or one who slights torture ([Yerushalmi Sotah 5:5](#)).<sup>6</sup>

Tineius Rufus was governor of Judea between 130 and 133.<sup>7</sup> He was the commander of the tenth legion of the Imperial Roman army and its auxiliaries. The first phase of the Bar Kokhba revolt ended with the defeat of the tenth legion and its retreat from Judea. The second phase of the rebellion began with the arrival of Publius Marcellus, the governor of Syria. He and his legions (and legions from Egypt) were also not successful in overpowering Bar Kokhba. The third and final phase of the war began with the arrival of legions from the Danube area in Central Europe, under the command of Julius Severus.<sup>8</sup>

Julius Severus reached Judea in 133, and crushed Bar Kokhba's revolt in the subsequent two years. I think R. Akiva's death occurred in 133 or before, while Rufus was still the governor

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<sup>3</sup> Binyamin Menashe Levin, ed., *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* (Heb). Haifa-Frankfort-Berlin, *HaHevra LeSifrut HaYahadut*, 1921, 13.

<sup>4</sup> R. Yohanan HaSandlar.

<sup>5</sup> Saul Lieberman. *Ridifat Da'at Yisrael*. Salo Wittmayer Baron – Jubilee volume, Vol 3, (Jerusalem, American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), "The Talmud Bavli never says that Rabbi Akiva supported Bar Kokhba or recognized him as messiah" (226, n. 92).

<sup>6</sup> R. Akiva did not survive the torture ([Berakhot 61b](#)). See Lieberman, 224, n. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Werner Eck (1983). "Jahres-und Provinzialfasten der senatorischen Statthalter von 69/70 bis 138/139", 169-173. In Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quintus\\_Tineius\\_Rufus\\_\(consul\\_127\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quintus_Tineius_Rufus_(consul_127)).

<sup>8</sup> Gedaliah Alon. *The History of the Jews in the Land of Israel in the Times of the Mishnah and Talmud*. (heb), Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Ha Meuhad, Vol 2 (1971), 37. [Available in translation](#).

and military commander, but his death might have occurred later. R. Akiva was jailed for about two years<sup>9</sup> before he was killed.

The Talmud discusses R. Akiva's death and the last phase of the Bar Kokhba war.

When the report that R. Akiva was killed in Caesarea reached R. Yehuda b. Bathyra<sup>10</sup> and R. Haninah b. Teradion, they stood, put on sackcloth and said: Israel our brothers, listen to us. R. Akiva wasn't killed because he was suspected of robbery, or of not learning Torah with all his might. R. Akiva was killed as a prophetic sign as it says "Ezekiel will be a prophetic sign to you." ([Ezekiel 24:24](#)) Soon there will not be any place in the land of Israel that isn't strewn with murdered corpses. As it says: "the dead bodies will lie [scattered everywhere] like manure on the surface of a field". ([Jeremiah 9:21](#)) ... It was said: soon the war came and upset the entire world. During the next 12 months the city councils of Judea stopped functioning ... By the time 12 months had passed, everything they had predicted had occurred. - [Semahot 8:9](#)

According to this Baraita: not long after Rabbi Akiva's death, "the war came." The 12-month period of the war was probably the first year of Julius Severus' campaign.

Severus did not venture to attack his opponents in the open at any one point ... By depriving them of food and shutting them up, he was able - rather slowly, to be sure, but with comparatively little danger - to crush, exhaust and exterminate them. Very few of them in fact survived ... Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past finding out ... Thus, nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate - (Cassius Dio, Sections 69.13.3 - 69.14.2).<sup>11</sup>

Whether Rabbi Akiva's death was before the war or before the third phase of the war (or even after the war), the date supports the claim of Prof. Gedaliah Alon, who wrote:

The death of the "first" students of R. Akiva preceded the Bar Kokhba revolt. For afterwards R. Akiva taught his "second" set of students: R. Meir and R. Yehuda etc. However, there was insufficient time for that to occur in the short period that R. Akiva lived after the

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<sup>9</sup> Lieberman, 230 n. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Yehuda b. Bathyra is in the text of the Oxford Bodleian Library, <https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx?mishibbur=614000&page=8>. Other versions have Yehudah b. Baba.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/cassius-dio/cassius-dio-on-bar-kochba/> Dio doesn't say it openly, but Severus was successful because he systematically burned down town after town.

end of the war.<sup>12</sup>

We can bring further support for the notion that R. Akiva's students died before Bar Kokhba's time:

R. Yohanan the Alexandrian disguised himself as a peddler and walked past the jail where R. Akiva was held. He called out. "Who wants needles? Who wants sewing hooks? What if she performed *halitsa* when there were no witnesses present? R. Akiva looked at him through the window of the cell, and answered: Do you have reeds? Do you have... kosher. ([Yerushalmi Yevamot 12:5](#))

R. Akiva was jailed after the Romans had already banned the teaching of Torah.<sup>13</sup> R. Yohanan of Alexandria belonged to the second set of R. Akiva's students. He was very close to R. Akiva and could be trusted.<sup>14</sup> The story implies that R. Akiva's first students had already died and R. Akiva had been teaching a second cohort of students before he was arrested.

R. Meir said. One time we were sitting before R. Akiva. We were reciting the Shema, but we weren't pronouncing the words aloud because of a quaestor (police

agent) who stood guard at the doorway. ([Tosefta Berakhot 2:13](#))

This account describes a period before R. Akiva's arrest, when teaching Torah in public was still permitted. R. Meir, who was one of the second-generation students, was already R. Akiva's disciple. Elsewhere, the Talmud indicates that R. Meir studied with R. Akiva for a number of years.

It happened that seven students of R. Akiva gathered together in the Galilee to decide whether to add an additional month to the lunar year ... R. Meir said, this is what I heard from R. Akiva. R. Yohanan of Alexandria replied. I studied standing before R. Akiva longer than you studied sitting ([Yerushalmi Hagiga 3.1](#))

The junior students stood before their teacher. The more senior students sat. R. Yohanan was claiming that his memory of R. Akiva's decision was more accurate than R. Meir's because he heard it as a junior student. The Talmud determines that R. Meir didn't spend all of his junior years with R. Akiva:

Initially R. Meir came before R. Akiva, but was incapable of grasping his approach. He came before R. Ishmael and learned the

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<sup>12</sup> Alon, 43.

<sup>13</sup> R. Akiva was arrested for teaching Torah (Lieberman, 226 n. 92).

<sup>14</sup> See Lieberman 230 n. 114. Someone wanted to learn Torah from R. Akiva when he was jailed. R. Akiva did not teach him, not even discreetly.

traditions. Subsequently he returned to R. Akiva to learn how to reason analytically ([Eruvin 13a](#)).

We have a report of another two students, members of the second cohort, who studied with R. Akiva for at least a decade before R Akiva was arrested:

R. Hanina b. Hakhinai<sup>15</sup> was leaving for the academy of the rabbis at the end of R. Shimon b. Yohai's wedding feast. R. Shimon asked him to wait so that they could go together. He did not wait, but went and sat in the academy for twelve years. ([Ketubot 62b](#))

Hanina b. Hakhinai and R. Shimon b. Yochai went to learn Torah before R. Akiva in Bene Barak and stayed there for 13 years. (Genesis Rabbah 95:30 ed. Theodor and Albeck, [Leviticus Rabbah 21:8](#))<sup>16</sup>

If Rabbi Akiva was arrested around 130 or 131, then these two students began to learn with him around 118. The previous year (117) corresponds with the Lusius Quietus campaign against Judea.<sup>17</sup>

The emperor ... ordered Lusius Quietus to clean the Jews out of Mesopotamia. Quietus organized a force and murdered a great multitude of Jews there, and for this accomplishment was appointed governor of Judaea by the Emperor. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History Book 4, 2:5*)

The Quietus expedition against Judea is mentioned in our sources as well.

After the war of Quietus<sup>18</sup> [the sages] banned the crowns of the brides and decreed that a father should not teach his son Greek ([Mishnah Sotah 9:14](#))

It's possible that around the time of the Quietus war, R. Akiva's first set of students died. The second set of students began their studies soon after that war ended. This solves the chronological problem: Rabbi Akiva's first set of students died long before Bar Kokhba's war, leaving R. Akiva ample time to raise a second set of students.

This chronology provides a solution to another difficulty. The Talmud relates that R. Akiva's first

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<sup>15</sup> Hanina is mentioned (according to one opinion) in [Genesis Rabbah 61:3](#) as one of R. Akiva's second set of students.

<sup>16</sup> The tradition that the students went to Rabbi Akiva matches the text of Rav Sherira Gaon's epistle, but doesn't match the tradition of the Talmud that R. Akiva went to them.

<sup>17</sup> Miriam (Marina) Ben Zeev Pucci. *The Revolt at the Time of Trajan* (Heb.), in *Studies of Jewish History in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Period*, ed. Isaiah Gafni (Hebrew) Jerusalem: *Merkaz Zalman Shazar LeHeker Toldot Ha'am Hayehudi* (1994), 98.

<sup>18</sup> This is the correct text per the Kaufmann Manuscript of the Mishnah. Other versions have "Titus."

set of students died between Passover and *Atzeret*. How could it be that his students died in a period of only seven weeks?

Quietus's expedition to Judaea lasted a short time. He arrived before the end of the winter in 117.<sup>19</sup> However, his patron, the emperor Trajan, had fallen sick in the spring and had set sail from Parthia back to Italy. The emperor died before reaching his destination. Some say that Trajan died in the beginning of August 117, while others say he died in the beginning of July 117.<sup>20</sup> His trip from Singara<sup>21</sup> (modern day Sinjar – a city in Northern Iraq) to Selinous, where he died, took about 35 days (2000 km).<sup>22</sup> Thus he left Singara either around the end of May or around the end of June.

Trajan had not chosen a successor and Quietus was certainly planning for his chance to become the emperor of Rome. Probably, he paused his campaign in Judea. He would need all his troops to fight off any other competitors. This tactic is exactly the way Vespasian commanded his troops after the death of Nero. Quietus's expedition to Judaea was basically over. It lasted from the beginning of the spring to some

time in May. It's difficult to translate between Jewish Holidays and corresponding Gregorian dates, but Passover and *Atzeret* both fall on that timeline.

Unfortunately for Quietus, Hadrian, because of his connections, became the emperor immediately after Trajan's death. There was no war of succession. Quietus was afterwards accused of conspiring against Hadrian and was put to death. (*Historia Augustus* 1:7).

Hadrian immediately deprived Quietus of the command of the Moorish tribesmen who were serving under him, and then dismissed him from the army, because he had fallen under the suspicion of having designs on the throne.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, R. Akiva's "first" students did not die in the Bar Kokhba war. They died much earlier; maybe as a consequence of the Quietus war. They died in a relatively short time frame - about two months. His "second" students spent many years with him. They mostly survived the Hadrianic persecutions and passed the Torah of R. Akiva to

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<sup>19</sup> Ben Zeev Pucci, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Dio and *Historia Augusta* give a date around 9 August. *The Chronograph of 354* records his death as 9 July.

<sup>21</sup> I don't know if he started his trip from Singara. It's possible that he started from further east, and started earlier.

<sup>22</sup> <https://orbis.stanford.edu/> The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World

<sup>23</sup> *Historia Augusta*, Volume 1:5, The Life of Hadrian, David Magie, translator, published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1921. Quoted from: [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Hadrian/1\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Hadrian/1*.html)

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