

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [11]

Nahum of 'Gam Zu' and the Magic Earth Insights into Taanit 21a (also Sanhedrin 108b)

Revised June 2021



Background to Our Story

The Emperor and the Jews



[Wikipedia](#)

The history of the Jews in the Roman Empire (Latin: *Iudaeorum Romanum*) traces the interaction of Jews and Romans during the period of the Roman Empire (27 BCE – CE 476). The two cultures began to overlap in the centuries just before the Christian Era. Jews, as part of the Jewish diaspora, migrated to Rome and to the territories of Roman Europe from the land of Israel, Asia Minor, Babylon and Alexandria in response to economic hardship and incessant warfare over the land of Israel between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires from the 4th to the 1st centuries BCE.

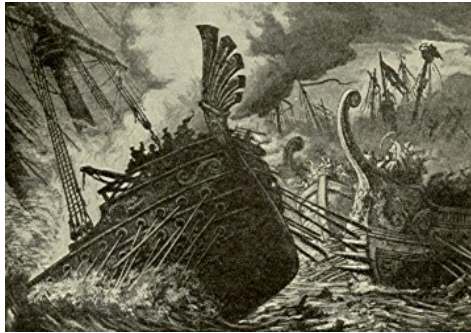
In Rome, Jewish communities thrived economically. Jews, both ethnic Jews and converts, became a significant part of the Roman Empire's population (perhaps as much as ten percent) in the first century CE.

The Roman general Pompey in his eastern campaign established Roman Syria in 64 BCE and conquered Jerusalem shortly after, in 63 BCE. Julius Caesar occupied Alexandria in 47 BCE and defeated Pompey in 45 BCE. Under Julius Caesar, Judaism was officially recognized as a legal religion, a policy followed by the first Roman emperor, Augustus (r. 27 BCE – 14 CE). The Romans deposed the ruling Hasmonean dynasty of Judaea (in power from c. 140 BCE) after the Roman Senate declared Herod the Great "King of the Jews" in c. 40 BCE, the Roman province of Egypt was established in 30 BCE, and Judea proper, Samaria and Idumea (biblical Edom) became the Roman province of Iudaea in 6 CE.

Jewish–Roman tensions resulted in several Jewish–Roman wars, 66–135 CE, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple and the institution of the Jewish Tax in 70 and Hadrian's attempt to create a new Roman colony named Aelia Capitolina c.130.

In the course of the 1st century CE, Christianity began to develop from Second Temple Judaism. In 313, Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan giving official recognition to Christianity as a legal religion. Constantine the Great moved the Roman capital from Rome to Constantinople ("New Rome") c. 330, sometimes considered the start of the Byzantine Empire, and with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, Christianity became the state church of the Roman Empire. The Christian emperors persecuted their Jewish subjects and restricted their rights.

Traveling in the Past and its Risks



Nahum of Gam Zu



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

Page 122

A *tanna* from the end of Second Temple period. Apart from the stories related here, it is known that Rabbi Akiva was his student, whom he taught his hermeneutical principle of amplification and restriction. Apparently, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael's differences of opinion with regard to hermeneutical principles date back to ancient times, as they are based in the principles of Naḥum of Gam Zu and Rabbi Neḥunya ben Hakana, respectively. The system of amplificatory terms is also attributed to Naḥum of Gam Zu.

And why did they call him Naḥum of Gam Zu – The plain meaning of his name is apparently derived from his town of origin, Gimzo, which is near Lod and is mentioned in the Bible (II Chronicles 28:18). However, due to Naḥum's praiseworthy character, they made a play on words with his name and called him Gam Zu (*Etz Yosef*).

Elijah the Prophet

Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet, was one of the greatest prophets of Jewish History and Jewish Legend. He lived in the period after Yeravam ben Nevat, who caused the Jewish Kingdom to be split into the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Yehuda, when the First Temple stood, but the People of Israel was sunk in the depths of idol-worship. His main antagonists were King Achav (Ahab) and his wife Queen Izevel (Jezebel), and his major disciple was the Prophet Elisha.

When Eliyahu was taken up to Heaven, and Elisha was walking with him, "...behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them one from another, and Eliyahu went up by a storm of wind into Heaven. And Elisha saw it, and

he cried, 'My father, my father, chariot of Israel, and its horseman...' " (II Melachim 2:11-12)

Eliyahu HaNavi was one of the very few to be taken up to Heaven without dying. He is known as the "Angel of the Covenant," and according to Jewish Tradition, he is present at each circumcision, when a new Jewish soul is brought into the World.

Eliyahu is the harbinger of the Mashiach, and he is the one "who will restore the hearts of the fathers unto the children and the hearts of the children unto the fathers," uniting the generations of the Jewish People across all of the ages.

The Text: Taanit 21a (also Sanhedrin 108b)

ואמאי קרו ליה נחום איש גם זו? דכל מילתא דהוה סלקא ליה, אמר: גם זו לטובה. זימנא חדא בעו לשדורי ישראל דורון לבי קיסר אמרו: מאן ייזיל? ייזיל נחום איש גם זו, דמלומד בניסין הוא

שדרו בידיה מלא סיפטא דאבנים טובות ומרגליות. אזל בת בההוא דירא. בליליא קמו הנך דיראי, ושקלינהו לסיפטיה ומלונהו עפרא.

פי מטא התם, שרינהו לסיפטא, חזנהו דמלו עפרא. בעא מלפא למקטלינהו לכולהו. אמר: קא מחייכו בי יהודאי! אמר: גם זו לטובה. אתא אליהו, אדמי ליה כחד מינייהו. אמר ליה: דלמא הא עפרא מעפרא דאברהם אבוהון הוא. דכי הוה שדי עפרא, הוה סיפיה; גילי, הוה גירי. דכתיב: "יתן כעפר חרבו, כקש גדה קשתו".

הוה חדא מדינתא דלא מצו למיכבשה. בדקו מיניה וכבשוה. עילו לבי גנזיה, ומלונהו לסיפטיה אבנים טובות ומרגליות, ושדרוהו ביקרא רבה.

כי אתו בנתו בההוא דירא. אמרו ליה: מאי אייתית בהדה דעבדי לך וקרא כולי האי?

אמר להו: מאי דשקלי מהכא אמטי להתם. סתרו לדירייהו ואמטינהו לבי מלפא. אמרו ליה: האי עפרא דאייתי הכא מדידן הוא. בדקוה, ולא אשפחוה. וקטלינהו להנה דיראי.

And why did they call him Naḥum of Gam Zu?

The reason is that with regard to any matter that occurred to him, he would say: This too is for the good [*gam zu letova*].

Once, the Jews wished to send a gift [*doron*] to the house of the emperor. They said: Who should go and present this gift? Let Naḥum of Gam Zu go, as he is accustomed to miracles.

They sent with him a chest full of jewels and pearls, and he went and spent the night in a certain inn. During the night, these residents of the

inn arose and took all of the precious jewels and pearls from the chest, and filled it with earth.

When he arrived there, at the ruler's palace, they opened the chest and saw that it was filled with earth. The king wished to put all the Jews to death. He [the Emperor] said: The Jews are mocking me.

Naḥum of Gam Zu said: This too is for the good.

Elijah the Prophet came and appeared before the ruler as one of his ministers. He said to the ruler: Perhaps this earth is from the earth of their father Abraham. As when he threw earth, it turned into swords, and when he threw stubble, it turned into arrows, as it is written in a prophecy that the Sages interpreted this verse as a reference to Abraham: "His sword makes them as the dust, his bow as the driven stubble" (Isaiah 41:2).

There was one province that the Romans were unable to conquer. They took some of this earth, tested it by throwing it at their enemies, and conquered that province.

When the ruler saw that this earth indeed had miraculous powers, his servants entered his treasury and filled Naḥum of Gam Zu's chest with precious jewels and pearls and sent him off with great honor.

When Naḥum of Gam Zu came to spend the night at that same inn, the residents said to him: What did you bring with you to the emperor that he bestowed upon you such great honor? He [Nahum] said to them: That which I took from here, I brought there.

When they heard this, the residents of the inn thought that the soil upon which their house stood had miraculous powers. They tore down their inn and brought the soil underneath to the king's palace. They said to him: That earth that was brought here was from our property.

The emperor tested the inn's soil in battle, and it was not found to have miraculous powers, and he had these residents of the inn put to death.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

? What does the name of the hero of our story mean?

Bonus ? Why did the Jews want to send a gift to the house of the emperor?

? Why did the inhabitants of the inn fill the chest with earth?

Bonus ? Why does Elijah, and not other Prophets, appear when Jews are in troubles?

Analysis Questions

? What does the expression "he is accustomed to miracles" mean?

Bonus ? When the emperor discovers that the chest Nahum brought was filled with earth he wants to kill not only Nahum but all the Jews and Nahum said at this moment: "Gam Zu Letovah" - "This too, is for the best." What does Nahum mean with this expression in the context of our story?

Bonus ? Why do you think Elijah the Prophet appears to save Nahum?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? When Nahum returned to the inn, and the inhabitants asked him why did the Romans treat him with such honor, he answered them: "That which I took from here, I brought there." Why did Nahum answer the question in this way?

Extra Bonus ? What is uniquely special about Nachum of 'Gam Zu'?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! The unique gift of being special without knowing it!



Mr. Magoo (known by his full name: J. Quincy Magoo) is a fictional cartoon character created at the UPA animation studio in 1949.

Mr. Magoo is an elderly, wealthy, short-statured retiree who gets into a series of comical situations as a result of his extreme near-sightedness, compounded by his stubborn refusal to admit the problem. However, through uncanny streaks of luck, the situation always seems to work itself out for him, leaving him no worse than before.