

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Stories with a Twist [302]

### "It is Time to Act for the Lord, They Have Nullified Your Torah!"

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69a



### Background to Our Story

#### Alexander the Great



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great)

Alexander III of Macedon (Greek: Ἀλέξανδρος *Alexandros*; 20/21 July 356 BC – 10/11 June 323 BC), commonly known as Alexander the Great, was a king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon. He succeeded his father Philip II to the throne in 336 BC at the age of 20, and spent most of his ruling years conducting a lengthy military campaign throughout Western Asia and Northeastern Africa. By the age of thirty, he had created one of the largest empires in history, stretching from Greece to northwestern India. He was undefeated in battle and is widely considered to be one of history's greatest and most successful military commanders.

Alexander's legacy includes the cultural diffusion and syncretism which his conquests engendered, such as Greco-Buddhism and Hellenistic Judaism. He founded more than twenty cities that bore his name, most notably Alexandria in Egypt. Alexander's settlement of Greek colonists and the resulting spread of Greek culture resulted in Hellenistic civilization, which developed through the Roman Empire into modern Western culture. The Greek language became the lingua franca of the region and was the predominant language of the Byzantine Empire up until its end in the mid-15th century CE. His military achievements and enduring, unprecedented success in battle made him the measure against which many later military leaders would compare themselves. Military academies throughout the world still teach his tactics.

## Shimon Hatzadik (Simeon the Just)



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon\\_the\\_Just](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_the_Just)

Simeon the Righteous or Simeon the Just (Hebrew: *Šimə'ōn hašadiq*) was a Jewish High Priest during the Second Temple period. He is also referred to in the Mishnah, where he is described as one of the last members of the Great Assembly.

Simeon the Righteous is either [Simon I](#) (310–291 or 300–273 BCE), son of [Onias I](#), and grandson of [Jaddua](#), or [Simon II](#) (219–199 BCE), son of [Onias II](#). Many statements concerning him are variously ascribed by scholars, ancient and modern, to four different persons who bore the same name: Simeon I (by Fränkel and [Grätz](#)); Simeon II (by [Krochmal](#) in the 18th century, [Brüll](#) in the 19th, and [Moore](#) and [Zeitlin](#) in the 20th); [Simon Maccabeus](#) (by Löw); or [Simeon the son of Gamaliel](#) (by Weiss). The scholarly consensus of the late 20th century has fallen on Simon II.

The [Talmud](#), [Josephus](#) (who identifies him as Simon I), and [Sirach](#) all contain accounts of him. He was termed "the Righteous" because of the piety of his life and his benevolence toward his compatriots. He was deeply interested in the spiritual and material development of the nation. According to Sirach, he rebuilt the walls of [Jerusalem](#), which had been torn down by [Ptolemy Soter](#), and repaired the damage done to the [Temple in Jerusalem](#), raising the foundation-walls of its court and enlarging the [cistern](#) into a pool.

According to the Talmud, when [Alexander the Great](#) marched through the [Land of Israel](#) in the year 332 BCE, Simeon the Just, dressed in his priestly garments went to [Antipatris](#) to meet him although Josephus states that Alexander himself came to Jerusalem. As soon as Alexander saw him, he descended from his chariot and bowed respectfully before him. When Alexander's courtiers criticized this act, he replied that it had been intentional, since he had had a vision in which he had seen the high priest, who had predicted his victory. Alexander demanded that a statue of himself be placed in the Temple, but the high priest explained that this was impossible. He promised instead that all the sons born of priests in that year would be named Alexander. Josephus relates the same story, but identifies the high priest in the story as Jaddua rather than Simon. This story appears to be identical with [3 Maccabees](#) 2, where Seleucus (Kasgalgas) is mentioned. This account is almost certainly legendary.

In his views, Simeon was midway between the [Hasmoneans](#) and the [Hellenists](#). He was an opponent of the [Nazirites](#) and ate of the [sacrifice](#) offered by that sect only on a single occasion. Once a youth with flowing hair came to him and wished to have his head shorn. When asked his motive, the youth replied that he had seen his own face reflected in a spring and it had pleased him so that he feared his beauty might become an idol to him. He therefore wished to offer up his hair to God, and Simeon then partook of the [sin-offering](#) which he brought.

Perhaps his most famous saying: *"The world exists through three things: the Law (Torah), Service (Temple sacrifice, and today prayer), and acts of loving kindness."* (avot 1:2)

### The meeting of the High Priest and Alexander



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit – Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem.](#)

339.

The description of the meeting between Alexander and the High Priest is cited by Josephus with some variation. Although Greek sources do not refer to the episode, it seems that this meeting did in fact occur, as described in the Talmud, at the location of the future city of Antipatris. This location was on the main road south, toward Egypt, on which Alexander traveled. According to Josephus the meeting was connected to the High Priest's reluctance

to violate his pledge of allegiance to the Persian king. The Persians were at war with Alexander, and the situation provided a pretext for the enemies of the Jewish people, primarily the Samaritans, to turn the Greeks against them.

## The Samaritans (Cutheans)



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans>

Samaritans are an [ethnoreligious group](#) who originate from the ancient [Israelites](#). They are native to the [Levant](#) and adhere to [Samaritanism](#), an [Abrahamic](#) and [ethnic religion](#).

The Samaritans claim descent from northern [Israelite tribes](#) who were not [deported](#) by the [Neo-Assyrian Empire](#) after the destruction of the [Kingdom of Israel](#). They believe that Samaritanism is the true [religion of the ancient Israelites](#), preserved by those who remained in the [Land of Israel](#) during the [Babylonian captivity](#); this belief is held in opposition to [Judaism](#), the ethnic religion of the [Jewish people](#), which Samaritans see as a closely related but altered and amended religion brought back by [Judeans](#) returning from [captivity in Babylon](#). Samaritans consider [Mount Gerizim](#) near [Nablus](#) (biblical [Shechem](#)) and not the [Temple Mount](#) in [Jerusalem](#), to be the holiest place on Earth

## Ezra Chapter 4

*<sup>1</sup> When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people who returned from exile were building a temple for the LORD God of Israel, <sup>2</sup> they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the families. They told them, "We want to help you build because we worship the same God you worship. We have been sacrificing to him since the time of King Esarhaddon of Assyria, who brought us here."*

*<sup>3</sup> But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of Israel's families told them, "It isn't right for your people and our people to build a temple for our God together. We must build it alone for the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia ordered us to do."*

*<sup>4</sup> Then the people of that region discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to continue building. <sup>5</sup> They bribed officials to keep the people of Judah from carrying out their plans throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia until the reign of King Darius of Persia.*

*<sup>6</sup> When Xerxes began to rule, the enemies of Judah and Jerusalem wrote a letter in which they made an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

*<sup>7</sup> Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their group wrote to him when Artaxerxes was king of Persia. The letter was written with the Aramaic script and translated into the Aramaic language.*

*<sup>8</sup> Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote another letter against the people of Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes. <sup>9</sup> At that time, Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe were with the others of their group—the people from Denya, Partakka, Tarpel, Persia, Erech, Babylon, Susa, (that is, those of Elam), <sup>10</sup> and the rest of the people whom the great and noble Assurbanipal deported. (Assurbanipal settled them in the cities of Samaria and the rest of the lands west of the Euphrates River.) <sup>11</sup> This is the copy of the letter they sent to him:*

*To King Artaxerxes,*

*From your servants, the people west of the Euphrates:*

*<sup>12</sup> Your Majesty, you should know that the Jews who came to us from you are now in Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are close to finishing the walls. The foundations are already in place. <sup>13</sup> You should also know that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are finished, the Jews will no longer pay taxes, fees, and tolls.*

*Ultimately, this will hurt the king's income. <sup>14</sup> Now, because we are paid by your palace, it isn't right for us to watch something happen that will dishonor the king. So we are sending this letter to inform you <sup>15</sup> that you should search the official records of your predecessors. You will find in those official records that this city has been rebellious and has been a threat to kings and provinces. This city has a history of rebelliousness. That's why this city was destroyed. <sup>16</sup> We want the king to know that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are finished, you will have nothing left of your province west of the Euphrates River.*

*<sup>17</sup> Then the king sent this reply:*

*To Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their group living in Samaria, and to others west of the Euphrates River: I wish you peace and prosperity!*

*<sup>18</sup> The letter you sent me has been read word for word in my presence. <sup>19</sup> I gave the order, and a search was made. I discovered that this city has a long history of uprisings against kings. Its inhabitants are guilty of treason and rebellion. <sup>20</sup> Jerusalem has had powerful kings who have ruled the whole province west of the Euphrates. Taxes, fees, and tolls were paid to them. <sup>21</sup> So order these men to stop rebuilding. Keep this city from being rebuilt until I give the order. <sup>22</sup> Be careful not to neglect your duty in this matter. Why should I, the king, suffer any more harm?*

*<sup>23</sup> Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and their group hurried to Jerusalem after hearing a copy of King Artaxerxes' letter. They forced the Jews to stop rebuilding.*

*<sup>24</sup> Then the work on God's temple in Jerusalem was stopped. Nothing more was done until Darius' second year as king of Persia.*

## **Megillat Ta'anit**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit – Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 338.

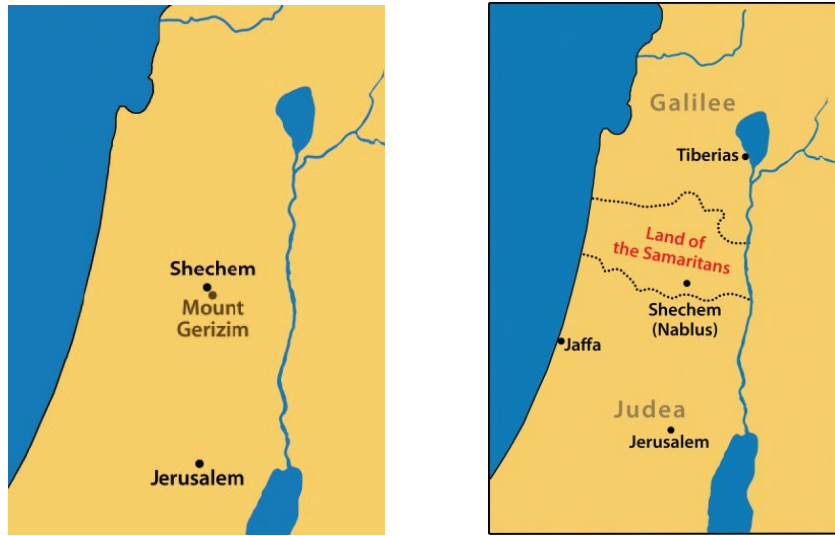
Megillat Ta'anit is a chronicle which enumerates various days throughout the year on which the Jewish People experienced victories and salvations. The dates were designated as joyous days and the Sages decreed that it was forbidden to observe a fast day on them. Consequently, Megillat Ta'anit, which means literally: The scroll of fast days, lists the days on which one may not fast. Composed mainly during the Second Temple period, the chronicle is one of the earliest halakhic texts, and significantly predates the writing of the Mishna. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, the chronicle was annulled, i.e., the days were no longer observed and it was permitted to observe fast days on those dates.

## **Mount Gerizim**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit – Yoma. Koren publishers Jerusalem. 338.

The Samaritans, also known as the Cutheans, built a shrine there during the early Second Temple period and directed their prayers there instead of to Jerusalem. Members of this sect, which still exists in very small numbers, live chiefly on the mountain slopes and in adjacent Shechem. They still perform the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb according to their interpretation of the verses. The ceremony attracts many tourists.



## Priestly Garments





This city in Eretz Yisrael was founded by Herod and named in honor of his father. Its location was apparently next to the Rosh HaAyin springs, at the crossroads to Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Jaffa. Although the city was built in the time of Herod, it was constructed at the site of an older town. For generations it was considered to be the border of the Judea.

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69a

תא שמע: בגדי כהונה, היוצא בהן למדינה – אסור, ובמקדש, בין בשעת עבודה בין שלא בשעת עבודה – מותר, מפני שבגדי כהונה ניתנו ליהנות בהן, שמע מינה:

ובמדינה לא? והתניא: בעשרים ותמשה [בטבת] יום הר גרזים הוא, דלא למספד.

יום שבקשו פותיים את בית אלהינו מאלכסנדרוס מוקדון להתריבו ונתנו להם. באו והודיעו את שמעון הצדיק מה עשה?

לבש בגדי כהונה, ונתעטף בבגדי כהונה, ומיקרי ישראל עמו, ואבוקות של אור בידיהו, וכל הלילה הללו הולכים מצד זה והללו הולכים מצד זה עד שעלה עמוד השחר.

פיון שעלה עמוד השחר אמר להם: מי הללו? אמרו לו: יהודים שמרדו בה. פיון שהגיע לאנטיפטרס זרחה חמה, ופגעו זה בזה. פיון שראה לשמעון הצדיק, נרד ממרכבתו והשתחוה לפניו. אמרו לו: מלך גדול כמותה ישתחוה ליהודי זה?! אמר להם: דמות דיוקנו של זה מנצחת לפני בבית מלחמתו.

אמר להם: למה באתם?

אמרו: אפשר בית שמתפללים בו עליך ועל מלכותך שלא תחרב יתעוה גוים להתריבו?!

אמר להם: מי הללו? אמרו לו: פותיים הללו שעומדים לפניו. אמר להם: הרי הם מסורין בידיכם.

מיד נקבום בעקביהם ותלאום בזנבי סוסייהם, והיו מגררין אותן על הקוצים ועל הפרקנים עד שהגיעו להר גרזים.

פיון שהגיעו להר גרזים תרשוהו, וזרעוהו פרשיגין. כדרך שבקשו לעשות לבית אלהינו. ואותו היום עשאוהו יום טוב.

אי בעית אימא – ראויין לבגדי כהונה, ואי בעית אימא – "עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך".

Come and hear an explicit *baraita* concerning this issue: With regard to priestly vestments, it is prohibited to go out to the country, i.e., outside the Temple, while wearing them, but in the Temple it is permitted for the priests to wear them, whether during the Temple service or not during the service, due to the fact

that it is permitted to derive benefit from priestly vestments. Learn from this that it is indeed permitted.

The Gemara challenges this: Is it really NOT permitted to wear priestly vestments in the country? Wasn't it taught in another *baraita*, in *Megillat Ta'anit*: The twenty-fifth of Tevet is known as the day of Mount Gerizim, which was established as a joyful day, and therefore eulogizing is not permitted.

What occurred on that date?

It was on that day that the Samaritans [*kutim*] requested the House of our Lord from Alexander the Macedonian in order to destroy it, and he gave it to them, i.e., he gave them permission to destroy it.

People came and informed the High Priest, Shimon HaTzaddik, of what had transpired. What did he do? He donned the priestly vestments and wrapped himself in the priestly vestments. And the nobles of the Jewish People were with him, with torches of fire in their hands. And all that night, these, the representatives of the Jewish people, approached from this side, and those, the armies of Alexander and the Samaritans, approached from that side, until dawn, when they finally saw one another.

When dawn arrived, Alexander said to the Samaritans: Who are these people coming to meet us? They said to him: These are the Jews who rebelled against you. When he reached Antipatris, the sun shone and the two camps met each other.

When Alexander saw Shimon HaTzaddik, he descended from his chariot and bowed before him. His escorts said to him: Should an important king such as you bow to this Jew? He said to them: I do so because the image of this man's face is victorious before me on my battlefields, i.e., when I fight I see his image going before me as a sign of victory.

He said to the representatives of the Jewish people: Why have you come? They said to him: Is it possible that the Temple, the house in which we pray for you and for your kingdom not to be destroyed, gentiles will try to mislead you into destroying it, and we would remain silent and not tell you? He said to them: Who are these people who want to destroy it? The Jews said to him: They are these Samaritans who stand before you. He said to them: If so, they are delivered into your hands to deal with them as you please.

Immediately, they stabbed the Samaritans in their heels and hung them from their horses' tails and continued to drag them over the thorns and thistles until they reached Mount Gerizim. When they arrived at Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had their temple, they plowed it over and seeded the area with leeks, a symbol of total destruction. This was just as they had sought to do to the House of our Lord. And they made that day a festival to celebrate the salvation of the Temple and the defeat of the Samaritans.

It is apparent from the *baraita* that Shimon HaTzaddik wore the priestly vestments even outside the Temple. This would seem to be in contravention of the ruling of the other *baraita* prohibiting this.

The Gemara resolves the contradiction: *If you wish, say* Shimon HaTzaddik did not wear a set of genuine, sanctified priestly vestments; rather, he wore garments that were fitting to be priestly vestments in that they were made of the same material and design. *And if you wish, say* instead that he indeed wore a set of genuine priestly vestments, but in times of great need, such as when one seeks to prevent the destruction of the Temple, it is permitted to violate the *halakha*, as indicated by the verse: "It is time to act for the Lord, they have nullified your Torah" (Psalms 119:126).



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

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** What happened on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Tevet according to Megillat Ta'anit? Why is it a festive day?

**Bonus ?** At the beginning of our story, Alexander the Great allows the Samaritans to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem. Later on, he allows the Jews to punish the Samaritans and to plow Mount Gerizim? What can we learn from our story about Alexander the Great and the general political situation of the Jews under foreign domination?

**Bonus ?** Why did Shimon HaTzadik go to greet Alexander the Great?

**?** Why do you think Shimon HaTzadik donned the priestly garments, carried torches, and brought the nobles of the Jewish people with him when he went out to meet Alexander the Great?

Answer.1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** What are the two explanations the Gemara uses to explain why Shimon HaTzadik donned the priestly garments outside the Temple in contravention of the ruling of the baraita? How are these two explanations essentially two different schools of thought?

**?** Why did the Jews act so mercilessly against the Samaritans?

Answer.1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** How do the sages explain the verse in Psalms (129:126) "*It is Time to Act for the Lord, They Have Nullified Your Torah!*"?

### **For Further Discussion**

**?** What was laudable in Shimon HaTzadik's course of action?

Answer.1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Can you imagine some people opposing Shimon HaTzadik's course of action? On what basis?

Answer.1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

## **“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

! Sometimes in life, to preserve the integrity of “the Book,” you must go off-script; but when is called for, and who should do it, is a tough call.



Our story is the story of a brave leader who went against the established rules of the Torah to save the integrity of the Torah itself, the Holy Temple, and the Jewish people

Who can break the rules? Under what circumstances? While our story doesn't give a general advice on going off-script or contravening the rules, it seems to imply that only exceptional leaders of unparalleled reputation and exceptional moral character, can infrequently and only in case of utmost necessity, break the rules for the sake of upholding the same rules they believe in.