

Queen Berenice: Heroine or Traitor?

Nazirites

This week’s Torah portion, *Naso*, teaches that God allows people to take Nazirite vows, to set themselves apart “for the sake of the Lord”, and thereby achieve a higher level of holiness. [Numbers 6:2].

A Nazirite’s vow included forms of abstinence. He or she was not allowed to drink wine or other grape products, get a haircut, or come in contact with the dead. The duration of the vow varied from 30 days to life.

There were many possible reasons for the vow:

- Achieving a higher level of holiness.
- Subdue desire for pleasure by abstaining from wine.
- Being distressed.
- Payment for the fulfillment of a wish (e.g., birth of a child) [Nazir 1:7, 9-10]
- For the opportunity to make a sin-offering [Nedarim 10b]

The most famous Nazirite was Samson. His mother promised to dedicate him to God during his whole life, saying:

[Lord,] if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor shall ever touch his head. [1 Samuel 1:11]

Prominent rabbis opposed asceticism. They called sinners and evil-doers those who fasted or became Nazirites or took any vow whatsoever, even if the vow was fulfilled. [Nedarim 9a, b, 20a, 77b; Nazir 4a; Ta’anit 11a]

Practice fell into disuse

- No Nazirites known since Middle Ages.

Case of Queen Berenice

-Berenice was a Jewish princess of Judea, sister of King Herod Agrippa II, with whom she shared power. Great-granddaughter of Herod the so-called

Great, whose family ruled Judea for 131 years (39 BCE - 92 CE) as a vassal-state of Rome.

-King Agrippa had her marry a foreign king (Polemon II, king of Cilicia) for political reasons, but she agreed only after he accepted to convert to Judaism and be circumcised. (She later left him and he gave up Judaism.)

-Lived through Jewish rebellion of 66-70, which resulted in the destruction of the Temple and one million Jewish dead and 100,000 taken away as slaves.

-In 66, Florus, procurator of Judea, systematically antagonized the Jews, plundered Temple for “taxes”, crucified rioters, sparked rebellion.

-Incensed and desperate, Berenice took a Nazirite vow, came before Florus crying, barefoot, hair shorn and nails uncut, disheveled, debasing herself before the Romans, begging for mercy for her fellow Jews. But Florus refused.

The Roman soldiers tortured and killed Jews before her eyes, and would have killed her also, but she found refuge in the palace, where she spent the night surrounded by her guards. [Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.15.1]

-King Agrippa implored the people to stop rioting, but they burned down his palace. In 67, Emperor Nero sent Vespasian and his son Titus to put down the rebellion.

-Berenice and Agrippa sided with Rome, gave them intelligence and even material help. [Tacitus, *Histories* 2.81.2] The historian Josephus, a Jewish general, did likewise and supported the Romans. Many Jews did not support the uprising and even fought each other. [Talmud: “The Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred – *sin’at chinam*.” [Yoma 9b]]

-Berenice fell in love with Titus in 68 and began a long affair with him.

[Tacitus, *Histories* 2.2.1; Suetonius, *Titus* 7.1; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 66.15.3–4]

He was so jealous that he had one of his generals killed when he suspected him of an affair with Berenice. [Aurelius Victor, *Epitome* 10:7]

-Talmud: What did Titus do [when he conquered the Temple]? He took a prostitute [Berenice] with his hand, and entered the Holy of Holies [with her]. He then spread out a Torah scroll and committed a sin [had sex] on it. [Gittin 56b]

-Josephus: Titus commanded that the Temple be spared, but Berenice set fire to it, believing the Jews would not surrender as long as it was standing... When Titus heard that the Temple was burning, he ran to help put out the fire, but he came too late, for the flames had already enveloped the whole Temple. [Self-serving legend?]

-In 75, after the war, Berenice went to live with Titus (now son of Emperor) in Rome. Public pressure made him send her away. When Titus became emperor in 79, she tried to go back to him but failed.

-From 17th century on, lots of works of art about Berenice and her affair with Titus (plays, novels, operas, etc.) (I, myself, studied in school the play *Bérénice* by French playwright Racine.)

Heroine? She was religious, cared about her people, placed her life at risk, was true to her convictions.

Traitor? She sided with the enemy, provided him with advice, information and material help, had an affair with him.