B. Rabbinic Judaism

Rabbinic stories about exemplary figures who give up their lives in the face of religious persecution belong to the wider discourse of martyrdom that flourished across the ancient Mediterranean world from the Hellenistic period on. While the idea of martyrdom is largely absent from the HB/OT, important building blocks of this concept appear within several late biblical works and especially in Jewish literature in Greek from the late Second Temple period (on these sources, see below). But despite these roots, rabbinic martyrology largely developed within the particular political and cultural conditions of the Roman Empire and shares numerous rhetorical features and theological or philosophical concepts with narratives of noble death produced in that context, especially by Christian writers (see, e.g., Boustan: 51–198; Shepkaru: 66–106; Gray; Boyarin; Lieberman). In addition, recent scholarship has emphasized that, despite the original Palestinian provenance of many of the martyrological traditions contained in the Babylonian Talmud, these materials were further shaped within the cultural context of Sasanian Iran (see esp. Rubenstein). Among the most prominent elements that rabbinic martyr stories share with the wider discourses of martyrdom and noble death in antiquity are: the intercessory power of the dying or the dead; the application of sacrificial language to the act of dying for God; the public enunciation of communal identity during trial or at the time of execution; and dreams or heavenly visions before or during the martyr's execution. In addition, the institutions of the Roman arena and law tribunal and, more generally, the Roman culture of spectacle likewise contributed to the form and content of rabbinic martyrology.

At the same time, rabbinic martyr stories are linguistically and formally distinctive. Unlike Christian martyrology, rabbinic martyr stories do not appear to constitute a genre of their own. Moreover, like other types of rabbinic story, martyr stories in rabbinic compilations serve the larger aims of the redactional context in which they appear, whether legal, normative, historical, or hagiographical. In addition, rabbinic sources from late antiquity do not apply a single unifying term (or set of terms) to the act of dying for God that is equivalent to the standardized Christian terminology of martyrdom as "witness" in a range of languages (deriving initially from the Greek stem μάρτυρ-). While idioms like "sanctification of the [divine] name" (*qiddush hashem*; see, e.g., *Sifra*, *Emor* 9.4) and "those executed by the government" (*harugei malkhut*; see, e.g., *bPes* 50a; *bBB* 10b) do appear in classical rabbinic sources, these phrases only emerged as stable technical terms for martyrs and martyrdom in the medieval period (Cohen: 18–22; Boustan: 55–60).

The rabbis of late antiquity were acquainted with a number of narrative traditions regarding non-rabbinic figures who experienced persecution, suffering, and, in some cases, execution at the hands of an oppressive ruler or his representatives. These stories are drawn from within the HB/OT as well as from outside the Jewish canon. Most prominent among these canonical stories that contributed to the development of the rabbinic discourse of martyrdom are the so-called binding of Isaac or Aqedah (Gen 22:1–19) and the court tales concerning the persecution of Daniel and his three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan 3 and 6). Of course, neither Isaac nor Daniel and his companions are martyrs in the full sense of the term: Isaac is not subjected to political or religious persecution and indeed survives his ordeal, while the figures from the book of Daniel are ultimately rescued from execution through divine intervention. Nevertheless, their willingness to offer their lives out of devotion to their god rendered them suitable models for later Jewish and Christian martyrs (van Henten). Numerous rabbinic traditions – perhaps formulated in dialogue with the Christian use of Isaac as a type for Christ – refer to the blood of Isaac that was spilt on the altar during the sacrifice (e.g., *MekhY*, *Pisḥa* 7 and 11; *Tan*, *Wa-yera* 23) or to his ashes (e.g., *bBer* 62b; *bZev* 62a) and attribute to them intercessory power, while several (e.g., *PRE* 31) even claim that he died on the altar but was later revived (Himmelfarb). Similarly, Daniel and his companions are invoked in rabbinic literature as exempla for the Jew's obligation to lay down one's life rather than transgress God's commandments (see, e.g., *Sifra*, *Emor* 9.5).

Rabbinic authors also drew on martyr-like traditions from outside the HB/OT, such as the colorful tradition about the execution of the prophet Isaiah by the wicked Israelite king Manasseh. This account first appears in the *Ascension of Isaiah* 1–6 (also known in modern scholarship as the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*), which was likely composed in 1st- or 2nd-century Syria or Palestine. While the sources and original socioreligious context of this composition are difficult to determine, the tradition regarding Isaiah's execution circulated far and wide and was incorporated into both the Palestinian and Babylonian talmuds (cf. *ySan* 10:2 [28c] and *bYev* 49b–50a; see Kalmin: 29–52). Most importantly, several rabbinic compilations contain versions of the martyrdoms of the mother and her seven sons that resemble the accounts in 2 Macc 7 and 4 Macc 8:1–17:1. The more elaborate of the rabbinic retellings (*EkhR* 1:16, §50; *bGit* 57b; *PesRab* 43) bear a striking resemblance to versions in 2 and 4 Maccabees, although the precise relationship among these sources is difficult to determine (Doran). Rabbinic literature updates the narrative by recasting the Maccabean martyrs as victims of the Roman persecutions under Hadrian, rather than of Seleucid oppression under Antiochus IV. Hebrew and Aramaic versions of the

story continued to circulate in various forms throughout the medieval period, exerting a profound impact on Jewish attitudes toward martyrdom (Baumgarten/Kushelevsky).

But the majority of martyr stories in classical rabbinic sources center on rabbinic figures. These stories typically take the form of relatively brief episodes narrating the circumstances surrounding the execution of one or two rabbinic figures (for a useful collection of rabbinic martyrologies, see van Henten/Avemarie: 132–73). Emblematic of this pattern are the numerous iterations across the rabbinic corpus of the executions of R. Aqiva (see, e.g., *MekhY*, *Shirata* 2; *yBer* 9.7 [14b]; *bBer* 61b) and of Ḥanina ben Teradion (*SifDev* 307; *bAZ* 17b–18a). In some cases, rabbinic martyrs are paired, as in the narrative about the twin executions of R. Ishmael and Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel (see, e.g., *MekhY*, *Neziqin* 18; *ARN* A 38 and B 41). Rabbinic martyrs are usually executed as punishment for their abiding commitment to teaching Torah or to fulfilling a Jewish ritual obligation. Rabbinic sources often also attribute the suffering and death of the rabbinic martyr to a minor ritual or ethical failing – with the very triviality of this sin serving as an indication of the martyr's true righteousness (Boustan: 55–77).

The atomized stories regarding rabbinic martyrs that were incorporated within various talmudic and midrashic compilations were gathered together beginning in the 5th century into a narrative cycle that recounts the sequential deaths of ten rabbinic sages. This anthological form of rabbinic martyrology is most commonly known as *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* (critical edition and German translation: Reeg; English translation: Stern). It should be stressed, however, that numerous versions of this general narrative regarding ten rabbinic martyrs were composed in both prose and poetry from the 5th century on and served a variety of functions, including as penitential hymns recited on the Day of Atonement and as dirges for the fast of the Ninth of Av (Boustan: 51–98; see the sources collected in Velner). Although produced in Byzantine Palestine, *The Story of the Ten Martyrs* is set in the 2nd century CE during the period of Roman repression that followed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The martyrology assimilates otherwise disparate martyrological material within a single, coherent narrative and theological framework. The narrative presents the deaths of the ten sages as vicarious atonement for the collective national guilt generated by the sale of Joseph by his ten brothers (Gen 37:27–28). This organizational structure combines rabbinic literary tradition with themes and forms from genres that emerged or were newly revived in the Byzantine period for Jewish use, such as apocalyptic literature, liturgical poetry, and prose narrative. This innovative form of rabbinic martyrology reflects a Byzantine Jewish culture that shared much in common with its Christian milieu, while also presenting the Christian Roman state in a profoundly negative light (Boustan; Shepkaru: 107–17). Rabbinic martyrologies, whether circulating within classical rabbinic compilations or within anthological collections, helped to condition Jewish attitudes toward persecution and martyrdom in the medieval period and beyond.

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C. Medieval Judaism

1. Patterns of Jewish Martyrdom in Ashkenaz and Sepharad. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews suffered persecutions in most European countries. Their reaction to these persecutions depended on the region in which they occurred. In Ashkenazic lands, the ancient ideology of *qiddush ha-shem* (sanctification of God's name) was dominant – persecuted Jews forced to choose between conversion/apostasy and being slaughtered deliberately chose martyrdom and death (see 2 Macc 7; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.225–23; *bGit* 57b). In Sepharad, on the other hand, conversion and apostasy were more often described as the common reaction.

The earliest literary source for Jewish martyrdom in the Middle Ages is the depiction of the suicide of the sages in Otranto, Italy, in an anonymous letter to Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut from the middle of the 10th century (Mann: 23–25).

During the spring of 1096 the Jewish communities along the shores of the Rhine were attacked by