

RAV, ROMAN IMAGERY, AND KORAH'S (TRUE) COLORS

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This essay suggests that the *Amora* Rav may have used Roman imagery and Latin/Greek wordplay artistically in his Midrashim—even to great advantage and startling effect.* Rav, a third-century, first-generation Babylonian *Amora*, studied in Israel¹, Roman Palestine, and knew Latin, and Greek technical terms² (though he did not read Greek³), and was well-aware of Roman practices and iconography⁴. (Rav's Palestinian colleague, R. Yohanan, another student of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince, engaged in Greek/Hebrew bilingual wordplay⁵; indeed, there is even use of Greek wordplay in the Mishnah itself⁶).

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¹ See A. Heiman, *Toldot Tanaim VeAmoraim*, “R. Aba bar Aibo [Rav]”.

² b*Rosh HaShanah* 23a.

³ y*Gittin* 9:8, 50c.

⁴ See: b*Avodah Zarah* 11a; b*Sanhedrin* 63b, y*Avodah Zarah* 1:2.

⁵ In y*Gittin* 9:8, 50c, of the trees that will grow out of water flowing from the Temple in the End of Days, “(Ezek. 47:12) and all their leaves for *healing* (לתרופה) (*terufah*)”: “Rabbi Johanan said: “For *therapeia* [Greek: *therapy*]””. In Gen. *Rabah* 99.7, of “their weapons are tools of *teamed lawlessness* (מכרתיהם, *mekheroteihem*)” in Jacob’s blessing of Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49:5), Rabbi Johanan says: “In Greek—*machairai*: “knives.”” In b*Shabbat* 116a, Rabbi Yohanan would call the Gospel, εὐαγγέλιον, “evangelium”: “*aven gilayon*”: (עוון גליון) “scroll of sin.” In b*Gittin* 55b, “Rabbi Johanan said: The ‘*humility*’ (ענוותנות) of Rabbi Zechariah ben *Avkolos* caused our Temple to be destroyed”. D. Rokeah (“*Zechariah b. Avkilos: “Humility or Zealotry*”, *Zion* 53 (1988) (Hebrew)) argues that R. Yohanan plays on the Greek *Eukolos*, “*humble*”, to employ irony against the zealous *aggressiveness* of “Rabbi Zechariah b. *Avkilos*.”

⁶ Daniel Sperber, *Greek in Talmudic Palestine*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2012, 136, cites m. Yad. 4:6: “*The Sadducees say ‘We cry out against you, Pharisees, for you say ‘The Holy Scriptures render the hands unclean and the writings of Homer do not’’’*”. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said, “*Have we naught against the Pharisees but this? For they say ‘The bones of a donkey (עצמות חמור, “atsamot hahamor”), are clean and the bones of Yochanan the High Priest are unclean?’*” Sperber points out, quoting Haim Rosen, that in the comparison of texts (Scripture/Homer) to bones (High Priest/donkey), behind “*atsamot hahamor*”, “החמור עצמות” [“the bones of a donkey”] is a Greek expression referring to Homeric poetry, “*aismat homerou*”, “the songs of Homer”.

Rav, I argue, sometimes borrows Roman/Greek iconography or imagery to elicit literary connotations of a Midrash even though he is *exegetically* expounding the import of a Biblical text. In this paper, I identify three examples in which he uses these Greco-Roman images effectively (There may of course be more; Rav's literary output in Aggadah in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and Midrashim is enormous.) One is a much-discussed case of Latin/Greek wordplay; one appears to use Roman iconography; and the final one, I argue, involves Roman imagery and iconography. All three serve as good examples of how literary meaning in Midrash is enriched in the context of the history of material and visual culture.

Adam and the Solstice (Yerushalmi *Avodah Zarah* 1:2)

In *yAvodah Zarah* 1:2, Rav, discussing the origins of *Kalends* (the *Kalendae Ianuarie*: Latin *calendae*, Greek *καλάνδαι*) and *Saturnalia*, the December and January solstice festivals⁷ in Mishnah *Avodah Zarah* 1:3's list of idolatrous Roman festivals, says, "*Kalends* was instituted by Adam *HaRishon*". As Adam saw the days became shorter and the nights longer he began to fear the world was descending into darkness because of his sin⁸. When he saw the days becoming longer [after the solstice], he exclaimed [in a *bilingual* wordplay] קלנדס קלון דיאו "*Kalendas, Kalon dio*" (variously interpreted as: *καλον δέω*, *kalon deo*: "Praise be to God," "God is good," "Freedom from God", or: *calo diem*: "Proclaim the day," "I proclaim the morning" "Beautiful day" or "May the sun set well," or, *καλον dies*: "How good! It is day!"⁹)

Putting Greek and Latin in the mouth of Adam¹⁰ cleverly reverses the conventionally understood origins of the pagan solstice festivals, linking them back to Adam's archetypal fears and worship. The delightful anachronism conveys a similar idea in the *Bavli* parallel (*baraita*, *bAvodah Zarah* 8a): "He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. But when he saw the days getting longer, he said, "It is the way of the world". From that day, he went and celebrated eight festival days; in the following year he made both into festivals (לשנה האחרת, "הלך ועשה שמונה ימים טובים, עשאן לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים"). "*He established them for the sake of heaven—but they established them for the sake of idolatry.*"

Lieberman rejects reading קלון דיאו as "*καλον dies*"¹¹, since "it is necessary to emend the text and read דיאס instead of דיאו, with the result of a combination of Greek and Latin!" In the context of a *satiric* comment, however, deliberately *combining* Greek and Latin in Adam's exclamation to God, conveys to comic effect how the pagan

⁷ See Rav's formula in *yAvodah Zarah* 1:2.

⁸ *bAvodah Zarah* 8a. Similarly, *Avot DeRabbi Natan* Ver. I:1; *Pesikta Rabati* 23; *Gen. Rabah* 11:2.

⁹ See also Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, New York (1950), 10.

¹⁰ In *bSanhedrin* 38b Rav says that Adam spoke *Aramaic*.

¹¹ Israel Lewy, *Verhandlungen des Vereins deutsch. Philologen etc.*, vol. 33, Leipzig 1878, 83 and H. Blaufuss, *Römische Feste und Feiertage nach den Traktaten über fremden Dienst* I, 7, cited in Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 10.

Greek/Latin festival, “for the sake of idolatry”, was corrupted from Adam’s holiday, “for the sake of heaven”. Moreover, if Rav’s story about Adam and *Kalends* in the *Bavli* version can be attributed to him as well (which needn’t be ruled out), there may be additional wordplay. Adam’s celebratory relief, *καλον dies*, “Good//Day”, as “Good! [It is] day!”¹², in the *Yerushalmi*, can *also* literally mean, “Good Day”, “יום טוב”. Good day, in Mishnaic Hebrew, plays against the “festival” that Adam’s joy engendered in the *Bavli* version, “He went and celebrated eight *festival days*; the following year he made both into *festivals*,” “הלך ועשה שמונה ימים” “טובים, לשנה האחרת עשאן לאלו ולאלו ימים טובים” In this way, the triple-play Greek/Latin/Hebrew wordplay neatly describes Adam’s “*Yom Tov*” “for the sake of heaven” degrading to a pagan festival.

Rabbi Akiva and “Tied Crowns” (*Bavli Menahot 29b*)

In a story in *bMenahot 29b*, Rav employs the classical imagery and iconography of “tying crowns”:

R. Yehudah said in the name of Rav: When Moshe ascended above he found the Holy One Blessed be He sitting and *tying crowns* to letters . . . He said before Him, “Master of the world, who forces Your hand?” He said to him, “There is one at the end of many generations and Akiva son of Yosef is his name who in the future will elucidate mountains of laws on every ornamental hair” . . . He said to Him, “Master of the World, You showed me his Torah, show me his reward.” He said to him: “Return behind you”. He returned around behind him and saw that they were weighing his flesh in the marketplace. He said before Him, “Master of the World, this is Torah and this is its reward?”

“*Tying crowns*” (the classical crown was a wreath, a string of jewels *tied* with a ribbon at the back) has a clear set of connotation in the Greco-Roman world, where *tying* of wreath *crowns* served to honor outstanding public service, sports or military, victories.¹³ Tying wreaths to victors appears in *Midrashim*,¹⁴ as do kings

¹² *Ibid.*; Rabbenu Hananel, *bAvodah Zarah 8a*.

¹³ *Tying* wreath *crowns* to honor people is well-attested (Plin. *H.N.* xv 39; Pindar. *Olymp.* iv 36). The Greeks awarded such laurel-leaf wreaths to Olympic victors, or tied leaf or flower wreaths to those performing outstanding public service, as well as victors in sports or poetry competitions. They similarly tied gold crowns for civic or military accomplishment (Aesch. *c. Ctesiph.*; Dem. *De Coron. passim*). Tied gold crowns were also rewarded to victorious generals (they were lavished profusely on Alexander after defeating Darius [Athen. xii. p. 539a], a custom the Romans borrowed as the *Aurum Coronarium*, tied gold crown.)

¹⁴ In *Tanhuma Re'eh 7*, a king of flesh and blood sends his legions out to war: if victorious, they return and *crowns him with a wreath*, but God fights His wars Himself *and gives the crown to Israel*. God defeats Pharaoh at the Sea *as a stronger athlete defeats a weaker* and takes a *wreath* for his head (*Ex. Rabah 22:11*). God *ties crowns* to people and angels or Israel *tie crowns* to God or His words (*bShabbat 87b;104a; bHagigah 13b; Pesikta Rabati 20; Ex. Rabah 21:4; Lev. Rabah 24:8; Shir HaShirim Rabah 3:11*). Angels likewise tie crowns to Israel (*bShabbat 88a*).

with tied crowns¹⁵, but the imagery of tying crowns to letters is startling and suggestive.

The crowns may indeed be meant to suggest a connection with the end of the story, Rabbi Akiva's execution at Caesaria¹⁶ by Rome. The *tied city-crown* associated with Tyche, the city goddess¹⁷ as personification¹⁸ of the idea of the Roman city-state, was connected in particular with Caesaria as Roman capital of *Provincia Judaea*.¹⁹ Rav would certainly have been aware of the ubiquitous *tied-crown* iconography in Roman Palestine. Almost all the cities which Rome permitted to mint coins represented their *tychai* patron goddesses on them with *tied city-wall crowns*²⁰, and, “one third of all Caesarea coin types are Tyche types”.²¹ Rav's uncle and colleague the Palestinian Tana R. Hiyya, once asked a question about the permissibility of a pitcher with a *Tyche* image on it²². So the “*Tying crowns*” of R. Akiva's creativity in the first half of the story may be in tension with the opposed

¹⁵ Esau's army of 400 kings, or Sennacherib's of 185,000: “all with *tied crowns*” (*Gen. Rabah* 75:12; *Tosefta Sotah* 3:18; *Seder Olam Rabah* 23) or 300 Edomite *kings tied with crowns* (קטיר "מלכין קטירי תגין") (*bMegilah* 6b); Gog and Magog call “*kings with tied crowns*” (קטירי תגין) to fight Israel (*Targ. Jonathan*, Num. 11:26); Ahasherus summons 127 kings, “all *tied with crowns* on their heads” (קטירי תגי ברישיהון) (*Targum Ester* 1:3). *Targ. Pseudo-Jonathan*, Ex. 19:6: “You shall be for Me . . . a *kingdom of priests*”: *kings tied with crowns* (מלכין קטירי כלילא).”

¹⁶ *Semahot* 8, at Caesarea, seat of the Roman procurators; in *yBerachot* 9:5, *Sotah* 5:5, before the procurator Tornus Rufus [Quintus Tineius Rufus].

¹⁷ J. J. Pollit, “An Obsession with Fortune”, in *An Obsession with Fortune: Tyche in Greek and Roman Art*, Yale University Art Gallery, 1994, 14; P. Gardner, “Countries and Cities in Ancient Art,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 9 (1888), 77. P. Broucke, “Tyche and the Fortune of Cities in the Greek and Roman World,” in *An Obsession with Fortune*, 34-63.

¹⁸ S. Paul, “Jerusalem, A City of Gold”, *Israel Exploration Journal* 17:4 (1967), 257-63, “Jerusalem of Gold: A Song and an Ancient Crown”, *Biblical Archeological Review* 3:4 (1997), 38-40; “Jerusalem of Gold—Revisited”, in A.M. Maeir and P. de Miroschedji, eds., “I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times”, *Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, Winona Lake (2006), 787-794; H.A. Hoffner, “The City of Gold” and the City of Silver”, *Israel Exploration Journal* 19 (1969) 178-180. R. Avner-Levy, “A Note on the Iconography of the Personifications in the “Hippolytos Mosaic” at Madaba, Jordan”, *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Liber Annuus XLVI* (1996), 363-374.

¹⁹ T. Grossmark, ““A City of Gold”: in Quest of Talmudic Reality,” *JJS*, 60 (2009), 48-59. For its significance in Caesarea: R. Gersht, “The Tyche of Caesaria-Marutama”, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 116 (1984) 74; L. I. Levine, *Caesaria under Roman Rule*, Leiden 1975, 32. For rabbinic awareness: E. Friedheim, “*Timi De-Romi* and *Tyche De-Romi*: A Reexamination of the Historical Significance of a Talmudic Expression” (Heb.) *JSIJ* 4 (2005), ff. 2, and “The Cult of Tyche in the Land of Israel during the Roman Period: A Study in Historical Geography” (Hebrew), *Jerusalem and Eretz Israel*, 1 (2003) 47-48.

²⁰ Y. Meshorer, *City Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period*, Jerusalem (1985), 20, 62

²¹ L. Kadman, *The Coins of Caesaria-Maritama CNP*, II, Jerusalem, 1957, 50.

²² In a Genizah text of *yAvodah Zarah* 3:3, J.N. Epstein, “Yerushalmi Fragments” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 3 (1933) 19; Lieberman, *Yevanit U-Yevanut Be-Eretz Yisrael*, 249.

iconography of the second half. (In *yShabbat* 6:1 a tied bridal-crown has a clear connection with Caesarea.)

Korah's All-Blue Tallit (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10:1)

Rav discusses Korah's 'all-blue tallit' in *ySanhedrin* 10:1's discussion of 'apikorsim' who have no share in the World to Come (Mishnah ad loc.): The story appears in *Tanhuma, Korah* 4, *Tanhuma (Buber), Korah*, 2, *Targ. Jonathan* 16:1, and *bSanhedrin* 110a, but this version's clear attribution to Rav predates the others.

“Said Rav, ‘Korah was an *apikorsi*. What did he do? He stood and made *tallits* that were entirely of *techelet*. He came before Moshe; he said, “Moshe Rabbeinu, a *tallit* that is entirely *techelet*, what is it that it should be obligated in *tzitzit*?” He said to him, “It is obligated, as it is written, ‘You shall make strings on the four corners of your garment (Deut. 22:12)’” . . . In that hour Korah said, “There is no Torah from heaven, nor is Moshe a prophet, nor is Aharon the Kohen Gadol.””

In magisterial Midrashic exegesis, Rav employs metaphor—and imagery—to amplify elements present in the biblical text. That is, his use of metaphor and Roman/Greek iconography and imagery serves an argument grounded in textual exegesis and methodology. And Rav employs the imagery to undermine the metaphor.

In methodology, his *Midrash* uses the textual nexus (סמיכות פרשיות) of Korah's rebellion (Num. 16:1) that directly follows the commandment of *tzitzit* (Num. 15:38-41). (It's explicit in the *Tanhuma* versions: “*What is written above the matter?*” “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them and they shall make for themselves *tzitzit* (Num. 15:38).”) In the *bSanhedrin* 110a, *Tanhuma, Tanhuma (Buber)* and *Targum Yonatan* versions, Korah dresses himself and his two hundred and fifty followers in *tallits* entirely of *techelet* to stage the rebellious confrontation with Moshe.

On the level of its Midrashic meaning, the "טלית שכולה תכלת", *tallit shekulah techelet*, the *tallit* entirely of *techelet*, metaphorically conveys Korah's argument, 'רב לְכֶם כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה בְּלֶם קֹדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכֶם ה' וּמְדוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קִהְל ה'". “You take too much upon yourselves for *the entire congregation are all holy*, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?” The metaphoric all-blue *tallit* embodies the egalitarian "כל העדה", “*the entire congregation*” which has no need for the superfluous *string* of leadership, which is Moshe²³. Posed as a halakhic question, it communicates how Moshe, having invented (*fabricated!*) the

²³ R. Bahye, ad loc.; *Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael* 22, among many others.

law of the individual string for his own interests, should not be leader of Israel or the teacher of Halakhah.

The metaphor of the blue *tallit* conveys the *biblical text's* opposition of the *individual* and the *congregation*. Moshe does in fact champion the *individual* (“In the morning God will make known *the one* He chooses . . . Korah and his congregation (קִרְחָה וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ), take for yourselves censers . . . and the man (הָאִישׁ) whom God chooses he is the holy one (הוּא הַקְּדוֹשׁ) (Num. 16:6-7)”. And subsequently he also later prays, “Shall *one man* sin (הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחַטָּא) and on *all the congregation* (וְעַל כָּל הָעֵדָה) You will be angry?”

The *large tallit* and *small* string imagery additionally plays on the opposition in the *biblical text* of “*much*”/“*little*”, “רַב” and “מְעַט”. Korah argues: ““You take *too much* (רַב לָכֶם) for yourselves for the entire congregation are all holy.” (16:7) Moshe responds accordingly: “You take *too much* (רַב לָכֶם) sons of Levi . . . Is it *little* for you (הַמְעַט מִכֶּם) that the God of Israel distinguished you from the congregation of Israel? (16:9)” Datan and Aviram accuse Moses: “Is it *little* (הַמְעַט) that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert, that you should also rule over us? (16:13).”

So Korah looks good, as it were, in his *tallit shekulah techelet* whose metaphor embodies and expresses the populist argument. But at the same time, looking at the meaning of its *imagery* in its clear reference to Roman iconography, the informed third-century (and twenty-first-century) reader may note the ironic commentary which undermines the level of metaphor.

Understanding the blue tallit’s significance in Classical visual culture elucidates Rav’s exegetical strategy.

Exclusive Imperial Purple

According to Roman practice, iconography, and law, *only the most exclusively privileged personages*, the Emperor or his restricted class of officials, could wear the *all-purple toga purpura*. The *toga wholly of purple* worn by the Roman emperors appears to have been first assumed by Julius Caesar (Cic. *Philip*. II.34). Originally during the Roman Republic, when a triumph was celebrated, the victorious general wore a *toga picta*, an entirely purple toga, bordered in gold. However, during the Roman Empire, purple came to be associated exclusively with the Emperors and their officers. Earlier Roman kings had worn an all-purple *toga traeba* or *toga purpura*, but Julius Caesar began the practice of wearing the *toga picta*, to publicly commemorate his victories, as his standard dress, and his successors did as well.²⁴ Servius (*ad Aen.* VII.612) mentions three types of *toga trabea*: One wholly of

²⁴ William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, London, 1875, 1134-1137.

purple, was sacred to the gods, while the *purple and white trabea* were royal robes, associated with the Latin and early Roman kings, especially Romulus (Plin. *H. N.* VIII.49, IX.39; Virg. *Aen.* VII.187, XI.334; Ovid. *Fast.* II.504). The earliest use of the term 'royal purple, *purpura regnum*,' appears in Cicero, *Pro Sestio* 57 (56 BCE); *Pro Scavro* 45 (*purpura regalis*)²⁵, though the robe was not prohibited but simply prohibitively *expensive* except for royalty²⁶.

Certainly, Alexander the Great (in imperial audiences as Emperor of the Macedonian Empire), the Seleucid emperors, and the Ptolemaic kings all wore Tyrean purple.²⁷ But Caesar allowed only those of a designated position to wear an *all-purple* toga (Suetonius). Augustus "gave orders that no one should wear the purple dress but senators acting as magistrates" (Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Book 49), and Nero made it punishable by death for anyone but the emperor to wear it. (Nero forbade any use of Tyrian purple dye and sent someone feigning to be a merchant in the dye to entrap dealers, close their shops and confiscate their property [Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*, Nero 32]).

In the context of Classical visual culture, in a 6th-century mosaic at the basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I alone wears purple, a solid-Tyrean purple robe. (His *Codex Justinianus*, Book 4.40 stipulated that anyone dyeing or selling Tyrian purple were at the risk losing their property and their lives.²⁸)

Jews of antiquity were certainly well-aware of the all-purple toga's iconographic visual significance. In the mid-3rd-century Dura-Europos synagogue wooden wall painting in Syria, for example, under the inscription, "Samuel Anointing David" ("שמואל דמשח ית דוד"), David stands as the central figure, distinguished from his brothers, like Justinian in the Ravenna mosaic, as the only one wearing an all-purple toga.

Further, *Gen. Rabah* (4th-5th century), 75:15, using Roman imagery, describes *David* as rejecting the trappings of kingship. He is described removing "his

²⁵ Similarly, Vergil, *Georg.* 2.495 (*purpura regnum*); Strabo, 14.1.3; Plutarch, *Tib. Gracc.*; Lactanius, *Inst. Div.*, 4.7.6.

²⁶ Meyer Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity*, Brussels, 1970, p. 8.

²⁷ There is a painting of a man wearing an all-purple *toga picta* at an Etruscan tomb (about 350 BCE).

²⁸ Tyrian purple production was tightly controlled in Byzantium and subsidized by the imperial court which restricted it for coloring imperial silks (D. Jacoby, "Silk in Western Byzantium before the Fourth Crusade" in *Trade, Commodities, and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean* (1997) 455f; notes 17–19). Theodosius II's *Codex Theodosianus* outlawed wearing, manufacturing, or owning Tyrean purple. Making counterfeit Tyrean purple with indigo was a crime severely punished under the Byzantine Emperors.

porpiron [פורפירון, *purple robe*, the Greek (πορφύρα, *porphyra*) and Latin (*purpura*) term for Tyrean purple] from upon him and *his wreath* from on his head, and wrapped himself in his *Tallit*, and came before the Sanhedrin.”

This is notable both for the obvious use of Roman imagery (the purple *purpura* and the imperial diadem *wreath*), but more importantly, David’s choice of the modest *tallit* as demonstration of his humility. In a halakhic context, *Midrash Tanaim* 17 writes of a Jewish king, whose “heart shall not rise above his brothers” (Deut. 17:20): “That he should not say, ‘*tzitzit* costs an *isar*; I shall make it [a *tallit*] entirely of *techelet*, the strap of *Tefilin*, I shall make entirely of gold.’” The imagery at once brings to mind a *tallit* of all *techelet* and a *toga picta*, ornamented with gold embroidery. (This description certainly contrasts with Josephus’ account of Herod’s Roman funeral, with him “enveloped in a *purple robe*, a *diadem wreath*, encircling the head and surmounted by a crown of gold”²⁹.) Perhaps the Midrash’s subtext is a rejection of an all purple-*tallit*, in which a “Jewish” *porphyra* is rejected as well. Overwhelmingly in Midrashim, *only God* wears a *porporia* (or clothes Israel in *porporias* [—and *wreathes*], in imagery usually emphasizing His love or protectiveness of Israel).

Thus *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 49 describes a robe of a non-Jewish king in comparing him to Mordechai: “Just as a king wears a *porporia* (פורפריא, πορφύρα, *porphyra*, *purpura*), so did Mordechai, as it says “And Mordechai went out before the king in royal clothes, *techelet* . . .” (*Esther* 8:15)³⁰. (*Midrash Tehilim* 22 asserts: “It is not the way of a commoner to wear a *purpura*,” and certainly not the king’s [ibid 21].) In fact, in the *Lev. Rabah* 28:6 version, in the opposition of the the *tallit* and the *porporia*, when Haman comes to dress him in the king’s *porporia*, Mordechai is wrapped in a *tallit* in prayer.

In *Lev. Rabah* 34:12, the nephews of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, silk-traders, were slandered; a royal emissary told them they could either make the emperor a *porpira* or be fined six hundred dinars. In an appropriation of Roman imagery, Ex. Rabah 15:13 describes how God attained kingship over Israel in Egypt, as Roman legions throw a *porpira* before a *doxos* (δοῦχος =important personage), that is, the one they have chosen to be Caesar. In *Gen. Rabah* 75:4, Jacob (Israel) removes his *purpura* before Esau (Rome) in obeisance, giving up his claims to royalty, a clear allusion to its significance in Roman iconography. When Diocletian abdicated in 305, the ceremony consisted of the emperor standing under a statue of his patron deity before

²⁹ *AJ* XVII 196-199.

³⁰ In *Gen. Rabah* 92:17, Joseph, as the *Egyptian* viceroy, shakes his *purpurei* at the thought of taking all of Jacob’s sons as slaves for Benjamin’s purported theft, which plays against their tearing their clothes as the silver cup is found in his sack (*Gen.* 43:13).

the assembled military, then removing his purple robes and placing them on the shoulders of his successor³¹.

Jews were certainly aware of the exclusivity of the purple dye: In a parable of R. Tanhuma (4th-century) in *Deut. Rabah* 1 (concerning how Moshe's speech in Deuteronomy fits within the context of God's Torah), a man caught by the king selling *argaman* protested that his *argaman* was not the same as the king's. (Indigo, whose chemical composition is close to that of Murex dye, was used to counterfeit Tyrean purple, a crime severely punished under the Byzantine Emperors. In *Codex Justinianus*, Book 4.40, anyone dying or selling Tyrian purple risked losing his property and life.³² The Roman Emperors regulated Tyrean shellfish dyes, but they did not restrict indigo.)

The Subversion

As I have suggested, in Rav's Midrash, the connotations of the Roman image subverts those implied by the metaphor. The borrowed "Epicurean" *imagery* of Korah wearing the exclusive all-purple *toga purpura* undermines the ostensible populism of the *metaphor* of the all-blue *tallit*, "טלית שכולה תכלת" as meaning, "כל" "העדה קדושים", "*the entire congregation are all holy*".

Pitting the (Roman) imagery against the metaphor functions, for us as readers, to question the veracity of what Korah says. Indeed, Korah is only looking out for himself or his exclusive "קורח", "*congregation of Korah*", the "two hundred and fifty men . . . chieftains of the congregation . . . men of renown," and certainly not for "כל העדה", "*the entire congregation*". When Korah agrees to Moses' "incense-wager," from which only one elitist winner will emerge (16:6-7, 18), the pretense and pose of populism is revealed for what it is.

Rav's Midrash, in opposing Korah's Roman *toga purpura* to the all-blue tallit, thus highlights how *in the text* Moshe ignores Korah's public posturing on the "*entire congregation's*" egalitarian sanctity (כָּל הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קְדוּשִׁים) and tells *Korah's* "*entire congregation*" (וַיִּדְבֶר אֶל קְרַח וְאֶל כָּל עֵדָתוֹ)³³ not to crave more exclusivity than they already have. He says that *Korah's congregation* (קְרַח וְכָל עֵדָתוֹ [קָחוּ לָכֶם מַחְתּוֹת]) was *justifiably separated* from the *congregation of Israel* (כִּי הִבְדִּיל . . . אֶתְכֶם מֵעֵדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל)

³¹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* XIX; Aurelius Victor, *De Caes* 39.1–4; *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 15.5.18.

³² Tyrian purple production was tightly controlled in Byzantium and subsidized by the imperial court which restricted it for coloring imperial silks (D. Jacoby, "Silk in Western Byzantium before the Fourth Crusade" in *Trade, Commodities, and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean* (1997) 455f; notes 17–19). Theodosius II's *Codex Theodosianus* outlawed wearing, manufacturing or owning Tyrean purple. Making counterfeit Tyrean purple with indigo was a crime severely punished under the Byzantine Emperors.

³³ See also later (16:16), וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל קְרַח אֶתָּה וְכָל עֵדָתְךָ.

to serve before *the congregation* (לְפָנֵי הָעֵדָה) that is, before all Israel (16:9). Moses calls Korah and his followers, “You and *all your congregation* (אַתָּה וְכָל עֵדְתְךָ) that *congregate* (הִנְעֲדִים) *against* God (16:11).”

The discrepancy between the *metaphor* and the *imagery* expresses Korah’s duplicity in literary form. It parallels the Bavli, b*Sanhedrin* 109b³⁴ where Rav describes how On ben Pelet’s, wife dissuaded him from the rebellion by arguing that while all the congregation is equal—some are more equal than others:

“Said Rav: “On ben Pelet, his wife saved him. She said to him, “What comes out for you from this? *If one is the master, you are a disciple, and if one is the master, you are a disciple*”³⁵

(That Rav’s all-purple *tallit* story appears only in the *Yerushalmi*, while the midrash about On ben Pelet’s wife, with the same underlying meaning [that Korah is an elitist, not a populist] appears in his name in the *Bavli*, may indicate that the significance of the “all-purple” *tallit* was not as readily understood in Bavel.)

Further, in the implicit irony, despite Korah’s remonstrations to the contrary, the act of publicly donning a *tallit* itself is hardly a populist move. It is in fact *investiture*, taking a high public office in the Classical world, the Latin *donning* (“vestire”) of a *robe*, “*vestis*”. In *Ex. Rabah* 27:9³⁶: “If a man is appointed to be the head of the community *and takes his tallit*, he shall not say, ‘For my own advantage I am appointed, *I do not care about the public*,’ but rather, ‘*All the troubles and bother of the public is upon me*.’” Korah, while seeming to make the latter claim in donning the *tallit*, is in fact saying the former.

In *Pesikta Rabati*, 10, just as a sage is solicitously careful with his *tallit*, “For with this *tallit*, they dressed me when *I was appointed a community Elder*”, so God tells Moses to care for the nation of Israel: “Be careful with this nation Israel, for when I created the world, she was the first to make me king.” In the same way, a king instructs his servant to be careful with this *porphira*, “For while wearing this I wed the king’s daughter.” In the Roman context, the “*purpuram sumere*,” donning the purple, meant the emperor’s *investiture* (*Eutr.* 9,8), and the “*nateles purpura*, the anniversary of it.

³⁴ See *Tanhuma* (Buber) *Korah* 24; *Tanhuma Korach* 10.

³⁵ In *Tanhuma* (Buber) *Korah* 24; *Tanhuma Korach* 10: “If Aaron is the Kohen Gadol; you are a disciple; If Korah is the Kohen Gadol; you are a disciple.” On ben Pelet’s wife and Korah’s wife are contrasted in b*Sanhedrin* 109b and the *Tanhumas*. In b*Sanhedrin* 109b, it is Korah’s wife who suggests that his congregation put on the all-blue *tallits*. In later Midrashim (*Midrash Mishlei*, *Midrash Ester*, *Midrash HaGadol*), she makes him the all-purple *tallit*.

³⁶ See also b*Bava Batra*, 98a.

Moreover, the meaning of *tzitzit* is *opposed* to that of *wearing purple*. In *Midrash Tehilim* 90, for example: “R. Hizkiyah said, ‘When Israel wraps themselves in *tzitzit*, they should not think they are perhaps *wearing purple*, but should look at their *tzitzit* as if the *glory of the Shechinah* is upon them, as it says not, “and you shall see *them*,” but “*it/Him*.””

Additionally, Rav's describing Korah as an “*Apikursi*” is multi-layered. On one level, it has the double sense of showing disrespect towards Moshe (in *bSanhedrin* 99b Rav says an ‘*Epikoros*’ is one who *disrespects a Talmid Chacham*)³⁷, as well as showing him to be a *heretic* (“Korah said, ‘There is no Torah from heaven nor is Moshe a prophet’”).³⁸ Beyond this, the imagery plays on its “Epicurean” etymology so that Korah the populist, in his exclusive purple toga, is exposed as an “Epicurean,” from *Epikouros* (Latin *Epicureus*, Greek *Ἐπίκουρος*), a follower of the heretical philosopher of “Epicurean” luxury (342-270 BCE)³⁹. At the same time, we needn't rule out wordplay between “*Apikursi*”, (“*heretic*”), and אפיקרסין (or *ἐπίχάσιον*) an “*overgarment*” in some sources (*Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, and *Yerushalmi*) which is contrasted with a *tallit*⁴⁰ (as here in Rav's Midrash).

Ironically, while Korah's entirely blue or purple *tallit shekulah techelet* was obligated in *tzitzit*, a *toga*, purple or any color, is in fact *exempt* from *tzitzit*: *Sifrei* 230: [“Strings you shall make for you on the four corners of] your garment”: except for a *toga*⁴¹ (“פרט לטגא”) . . . since they do not have four corners.”⁴² As it is written in *Sifrei Zuta* 15:38: “*Togas* (“טגיות”) are not obligated⁴³ in *tzitzit*”.

Summary

Rav employs strategic *anachronism*, in employing Roman imagery, as well as Latin/Greek wordplay in his Midrashic readings. In the *yAvodah Zarah Kalends* story, placing Greek and Latin in the mouth of Adam cleverly reverses the pagan solstice festival origins in Adam's archetypal fears and worship. Similarly, the

³⁷ Similarly, *bNedarim* 23a; *Sifrei Deut* 12, etc.

³⁸ *Korban HaEdah* (ad loc.) cites both possibilities.

³⁹ See also Hans-Jürgen Becker, “‘Epikureer’ im Talmud Yerushalmi”, *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture I*, p. 409-412; Jenny R. Labendz, “Know What to Answer the Epicurean”: A Diachronic Study of the *Apiqoros* in Rabbinic Literature”, *HUCA* 74 (2003) p. 175-214.

⁴⁰ See A. Kohut, *Aruch HaShalem*, “*Epikarsin*”, Vol. 1, 234; Keren Kirschenbaum, “*Epikarsin*”, *Netuim* 6 (2000), 87-92 [Hebrew]; S. Lieberman, “Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the *Acta Martyrum*”, *JQR* 35 (1944-1945), 2.

⁴¹ “כסותך, פרט לטגא . . . לפי שאינם מרובעים”.

⁴² Though there is wide variety of toga styles, the garment always has *rounded* ends (S. Stone, “The Toga: From National to Ceremonial Costume,” in J.L. Sebesta and L. Bonfante, eds., *The World of Roman Costume* (Madison, 1994) 13-45.

⁴³ “טגיות אינן חייבין בציצית”.

Korah story's *anachronistic* Roman imagery effectively creates the disconnect between the metaphor of ostensible populism (the all-blue *tallit*) and the true colors of exclusivist elitism (the *toga purpura*).