

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 64 (2008)  
  
**Artikel:** "Hilaria" : on the historical meaning of a pagan celebration mentioned in the Land of Israel Midrashim  
**Autor:** Friedheim, Emmanuel  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-960672>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# **“Hilaria”: On the Historical Meaning of a Pagan Celebration Mentioned in Land of Israel Midrashim**

by *Emmanuel Friedheim\**

In 1901 Isidore Lévy showed that the Talmudic literature is the only extant broad literature of Semitic origin from the first centuries CE, and that at times it indicates how people of Semitic-Eastern descent viewed Gentile culture, while we usually learn of the various Gentile practices from the Graeco-Roman literature. According to Lévy, the Talmudic literature provides a view of cultural contents, especially in regard to pagan cults, that differs from, and complements, that of the classical literature.<sup>1</sup> The study of the Rabbinical knowledge of the Graeco-Roman and Eastern religious cultures has advanced greatly in recent years, and demonstrates the Rabbis' extensive knowledge of all aspects of the life and rites of the Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> The Rabbis were cognizant of

---

\* Dr. *Emmanuel Friedheim*, [efriedheim@yahoo.ca](mailto:efriedheim@yahoo.ca), Dept. of Jewish History, Bar Ilan University, IL – Ramat Gan 52900, Israel. – The author wishes to express his sincere gratitude to Professor Daniel Sperber for his helpful comments. This research was supported by a grant from the Ihel fund (Office of the President, Bar Ilan University).

<sup>1</sup> I. LÉVY, Cultes et rites syriens dans le Talmud, in: *Revue des Études Juives* 43 (1901), p. 183. An identical insight was raised in the scholarly research a century later; see, e.g., M. SARTRE, *D'Alexandre à Zénobie: Histoire du levant antique*, Paris 2001, p. 529.

<sup>2</sup> S. LIEBERMAN, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine – Studies in the Literary Transmission Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B. C. E – IV Century C. E.*, New York 1962, pp. 115-138. On the study of the historical reality embodied in the pagan ritual details mentioned in the Rabbinic literature, see also M. HADAS-LEBEL, Le Paganisme à travers les sources rabbiniques des IIe et IIIe siècles: Contribution à l'étude du syncrétisme dans l'empire romain, in: W. Haase & H. Temporini (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* [= *ANRW*] II,19,2, Berlin / New York 1979, pp. 397-485; G. BOHAK, Rabbinic Perspectives on Egyptian Religion, in: *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2 (2000), pp. 215-31; G. VELTRI, Römische Religion an der Peripherie des Reiches: Ein Kapitel rabbinischer Rhetorik, in: P. SCHÄFER & C. HEZSER (eds.), *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, vol. 2, Tübingen 2000, pp. 81-138; H. CANCIK, Fremde Bilder: Kult und Kunst in den Talmud-Traktaten Abodah Zarah, in: B. LUCHESI & K. VON STUCKRAD (eds.),

many pagan festivals, and numerous scholarly proposals have been raised regarding the Halakhic thought behind the Rabbis' rulings on questions pertaining to these holidays, in light of the historical changes that marked the late Second Temple period and the time of the Mishnah and Talmud.<sup>3</sup> Saul Lieberman argued in one of his studies that numerous details of pagan practices and much information regarding the heathens themselves are scattered throughout the Rabbinic literature;<sup>4</sup> we seek to analyze one of these details, from the historical reality, that has been untouched by scholarly research, and attempt to thereby expand the study of the Rabbis' knowledge pertaining to the worship of foreign gods.

The Land of Israel Amoraim used the Greek term *hilaria* (ἡλάρια), as is taught in the midrashic work Shir ha-Shirim Rabba:

R. Johanan expounded a Scriptural verse regarding Israel before [the Revelation at] Mount Sinai: The flock that stood at Mount Sinai were not standing באלירא<sup>5</sup> [באילריא]; [rather, they stood] "behind your veil [*le-šamatekh*" (Cant.

---

*Religion und Kulturellen Diskurs: Festschrift für H. G. Kippenberg zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin 2004, pp. 273-89; Z. SAFRAI, The Aramaic-Speaking Gentile Population in the Land of Israel in the Roman Period, in: M. MOR ET AL., *Jews and Gentiles in the Holy Land in the Days of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud*, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 95-100 (Hebrew). On the numerous pagan details embedded in the Rabbinic literature, see the recent book: E. FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine: Étude historique des Realia talmudiques (I<sup>er</sup>-IV<sup>ème</sup> siècles)*, Leiden / Boston 2006 (= *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, vol. 157).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 307-82. On the Egyptian and Persian holidays mentioned in the Rabbinic literature, see also S. T. LACHS, An Egyptian Festival in Canticles Rabba, in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 46 (1950), pp. 47-54; A. KOHUT, Les fêtes persanes et babyloniennes mentionnées dans les Talmuds de Babylone et de Jérusalem, in: *Revue des Études Juives* 24 (1892), pp. 256-71; S. H. TAQIZADEH, The Iranian Festivals Adopted by the Christians and Condemned by the Jews, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1940-1942), pp. 632-653, esp. pp. 637-39.

<sup>4</sup> Lieberman, *Hellenism*, p. 128; it should be recalled in this context that Prof. Lieberman greatly encouraged the study of the concrete reality reflected in the Rabbinic literature. See, e.g., S. LIEBERMAN, [Grain] Mills and Those Who Work with Them, in: *Tarbiz* 50 (1981), pp. 128-35, esp. p. 128 (= IDEM, *Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature*, ed. D. ROSENTHAL, Jerusalem 1991, p. 383) (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> In accordance with ed. Vilna.

4:1), for they would confine themselves regarding each divine utterance, and would not stand in Hilaria, but rather in awe, trembling, and sweat.<sup>6</sup>

And in another Amoraic teaching:

Another comment: Why were Israel "enclosed" for solemn assembly for an additional day?<sup>7</sup> Rav said: By what parable may the question be answered? By that of a king to whom came a [formal] occasion for rejoicing, during which his tenants arrived and accorded him honour, and the people in his household arrived and accorded him honour. To all these the matron kept hinting, saying: "Now, while the king conducts himself with you during the Hilaria, get at him for satisfaction of your wishes." When they did not see what she was hinting at, the matron pressed the king for an additional day of feasting during which the people might get satisfaction of their wishes from the king. So, too, the Torah keeps hinting to Israel: "Ask for satisfaction of your wishes." How [does the Torah do] so? [The verse prescribing the libations] for the second day [Num. 29:18, uses the wording] *ve-niskeihem* ["and their libations"]; for the sixth day, *u-nesakheha* [v. 31, "and its libations"]; and for the seventh day, *ke-mišpaṭam* [v. 33, "after their ordinance"] - [with the letters *mem*, *yod*, and *mem* in these variants forming the word] *mayim* [water]. But since they did not see [to what the Torah was hinting, i.e., asking for rain during the Sukkot festival], [the Torah itself] pressed in their behalf for an additional day, the eighth day [= Shemini Ašeret].<sup>8</sup>

Marcus Jastrow defines *hilaria* as a "day of rejoicing, both private and public; esp. new days of public rejoicings appointed by a new em-

---

<sup>6</sup> ShirR 4:4 (ed. DUNSKY, p. 102).

<sup>7</sup> An allusion to Num. 29:35: "On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn assembly [*ašeret*]; you shall not work at your occupations."

<sup>8</sup> PesK 28 (ed. MANDELBAUM, p. 420; see the textual variants, l. 11; trans. based on W. G. BRAUDE & I. J. KAPSTEIN, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, Philadelphia 1975, p. 430). The wording "an occasion for rejoicing" in the exegesis is parallel to *hilaria*. See also PesK (ed. Mandelbaum, p. 432; trans. based on BRAUDE & KAPSTEIN: "[Additional Piska] from Another Source", 28:8, p. 442): "R. Alexandri said: [In this connection, consider the parable of] a king to whom a [formal] occasion for rejoicing came. During the subsequent seven days of feasting, his matron kept hinting to the people of the palace, saying: 'Now is the time, while the king is occupied with his Hilaria, to get at him for satisfaction of your wishes'; see the textual variants in MANDELBAUM. See also PesR 52:6 (ed. FRIEDMANN, fol. 202b; trans. W. G. BRAUDE, New Haven / London 1968, vol. 2, p. 882): "R. Alexandrai said: In this connection, consider the parable of a king to whom came a [formal] occasion for rejoicing. During the subsequent seven days of feasting, his matron kept hinting to the people of the palace, saying: 'Now is the time, while the king is with his Hilaria, to get at him for satisfaction of your needs'." See MANDELBAUM, n. 9. *Arukh*, s. v. אֶלְרִיא, copied this, and explained, "this means rejoicing". This source, as well, indicates that Hilaria is parallel to the king's rejoicing on his festival.



peror consisting of games, masquerades &c.”<sup>9</sup> as does Julius Levy in his Talmudic dictionary.<sup>10</sup> Saul Lieberman, following Samuel Krauss, understands the word *hilaria* / *ilroya* (אלר[ו]יא / אילריא) in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* slightly differently. He writes: “The intent here is to the celebrations held on holidays designated for rejoicing [τὰ ἑρᾶ] ἡλάρια, and the exegete uses this word here in reference to Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret, ‘the time of our rejoicing’, as Krauss fundamentally observed in his dictionary, in the entry *Hilaria*, p. 58”.<sup>11</sup> It therefore seems that this term and its parallels in the Rabbinic literature are indicative of an extremely joyous event celebrated by Gentiles in the Talmudic period, one that was marked by frivolity, excessive merrymaking, and revelry.<sup>12</sup> Krauss and Lieberman maintain that these celebrations were conducted on holidays, while Jastrow asserts that this was an imperial observance accompanied by games and the like. These scholars, however, did not indicate any historical source attesting to the observance of this festival, neither in an imperial context nor in any defined celebratory setting, except for Krauss, who notes that this was observed by the Romans on March 25 (which is an important point that we will discuss below). Even Krauss, however, makes no attempt to understand the rhetorical and historical meaning implicit in these exegetical references to the Gentile holiday. Rav, R. Johanan, R. Eleazar ben Pedat, and R. Alexandri, who used this term, were active in the Land of Israel during the course of the third century. To what pagan event, then, did the term *hilaria* refer? Or, in other words, can we identify the Hilaria festival among the pagan rites conducted in the Land of Israel during this period, or, perhaps, understand the exegetes' use of this term?<sup>13</sup> As

---

<sup>9</sup> M. JASTROW, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, New York 1903 [= repr. New York 1985], p. 73, s. v. אילריא.

<sup>10</sup> J. LEVY, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, vol. 3, Berlin / Wien 1924, p. 91, s. v. אלירא: (gr. ἡλάρια = ἡλαρότης) “Heiterkeit, Fröhlichkeit, Hilaritas”; s. v. אילריא: (gr. τὰ ἡλάρια, (Hilaria) “Freudenfest”.

<sup>11</sup> S. LIEBERMAN, Notes, in: *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (ed. MANDELBAUM, p. 475). See also S. KRAUSS, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, vol. 1, Berlin 1898 [= repr. Hildesheim 1966], p. 58: “Hilaria, ein Freudenfest der Römer, gefeiert am 25 März.”

<sup>12</sup> From which the modern words are derived: in English, *hilarity*; and in French: *hilarité*; and in additional languages, all of which denote excessive mirth.

<sup>13</sup> Significantly, these exegetes saw no need to translate the term *hilaria* into a matching Hebrew or Land of Israel Aramaic term, such as *leṣanut*, *qallut*

we shall see, the sources and the studies of these rites suggest three possible contexts, and by the process of elimination we shall attempt to indicate the most likely one.

### 1. “Hilaria” – the Greek context:

The Hilaria festival mentioned in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* was most probably connected with a public, official celebration in which the ruler

---

רוֹשׁ, or the like. This leads us to assume that the word's philological meaning, and perhaps realistic one, as well, was well known and understood by the Jews in the Land of Israel, and to conclude that this holiday was quite popular during the Talmudic period. It is noteworthy in this context that in the research of Latin and Greek onomastics, the names Hilaeira, Hilarianus, Hilario, Hilarius, and the like were quite common throughout the Roman empire. See, e.g., W. SMITH (ed.), *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol. 2, London 1880, pp. 468-72. Epigraphic sources that were discovered in various parts of the Mediterranean basin, such as Aetolia, Epirus, Illyria, Apulia (southern Italy), Cyrenaeca, and many other locations, contain the names Ἰλαρία, Ἰλαριανός, Ἰλαρίνος, Ἰλαρίων, Ἰλαρος. See P. M. FRASER & E. MATTHEWS (eds.), *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, vol. IIIA, Oxford 1997, pp. 218-19; IDEM, vol. IIIB, Oxford 2000, p. 207. Incidentally, it should be noted that the Ἰλαρία also is mentioned as a personal name in an (undated) Greek inscription uncovered in the baths of Hammat Gader. See L. DI SEGNI, The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader, in: Y. HIRSCHFELD (ed.), *The Roman Baths of Hammat Gader*, Jerusalem 1997, pp. 218-19 no. 35: Ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις τόποις μνησθῇ Ἰλαρία. Ἡ ὕψατο Συνκλήτιος. Κ(ύρι)ε. εἰσάκουσον, Ἀμήν [“In those holy places may Hilaria be remembered. Syncletius uttered this prayer: hearken, O Lord ! Amen”]; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 47 (1997), p. 608 no. 2016. We also know of the miracles attributed to the Christian Hilarion (291-371), who was born south of Gaza. He disputed with pagans at Maiumas, the port of Gaza, during the Maiumas festival; see Hieronymus, *Vita S. Hilarionis* 20 (in: J. P. MIGNE [ed.], *Patrologia Latinae* 23:37). Clearly, this name and its linguistic derivatives were very widely distributed throughout the Roman Empire, and especially in the Land of Israel, both in Greek and Latin. Additionally, if the Land of Israel Amoraim used the Greek term to describe a certain phenomenon, when Hebrew or Aramaic terms could have served equally well to transmit a similar message, then this term bore special content, that could not be rendered in Semitic terms. See S. LIEBERMAN, Kalos, Killussin, in: *Alei Ayin: The Salman Schocken Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 1948-1952, p. 75 (= IDEM, *Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature*, p. 433) (Hebrew); E. E. URBACH, Kilos – About Lieberman from Lieberman, in: *Researches in Talmudic Literature – A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Shaul Lieberman Held 13-14 June 1978*, Jerusalem 1983, p. 8 (Hebrew).

played a central role. Accordingly, and following the Belgian orientalist Franz Cumont, we should take note of the Ἰλαρία festival held in classical Greece upon the coronation of a new king.<sup>14</sup> The Rabbis apparently referred to this festival when they spoke of the “Hilaria of a king to whom came a [formal] occasion for rejoicing”. Cumont, however, relied on the writings of the Greek playwright Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 BCE), and besides this source, there is no proof of the continuing use of the Greek term *hilaria* in the late Roman period to characterize the festivities accompanying the rise to power of the Roman emperor. Moreover, the Rabbis were cognizant of the Roman holiday marking the emperor's ascent to the throne (*dies imperii*), but referred to it with a different term: “the anniversaries [*yom genusia*, and with many variants] of kings” or “the commemoration of empire [*kratesis*]”.<sup>15</sup> The suggested parallel between the Hilaria of the Rabbinic midrashim and the commemoration of the rise to power of the Roman emperor should therefore be rejected.

## 2. “Hilaria” – the Egyptian context:

A more likely possibility for understanding the realistic meaning of the *hilaria* is to be found in the inclusion in the Roman calendar of Philocalus (354 CE) of a *Hilaria* festival in honour of the Egyptian goddess Isis that was observed on November 3,<sup>16</sup> that was part of a much broader festive period called *Isia*. These celebrations began on October 28, when the masses observed the *Inuentio Osiridis*, and reached their

---

<sup>14</sup> F. CUMONT, Hilaria, in: G. WISSOWA (ed.), *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 8 / 2, Stuttgart 1913, col. 1597: “Ἰλαρία war der Name verschiedener in der griechischen Welt (z. B. in Kreta) gefeierten Feste, welche auch bei glücklichen Ereignissen, wie der Thronbesteigung eines Prinzen, offiziell befohlen wurden.”

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., mAZ 1:2; bAZ 10a; and see the extensive discussion: FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 339-41.

<sup>16</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. 1, Berlin 1902, p. 334: KAL.NOV ... III HILARIA; CUMONT, Hilaria. See also D. PORTE, *Fêtes romaines antiques*, Paris 2001, p. 151. On the Roman-period festivals in honour of Isis held in the month of November, see also H. STERN, La date de la fête d'Isis du mois de Novembre à Rome, in: *Comptes-Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1968), pp. 43-50; M. MALAISE, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie*, Leiden 1972 (= *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales de l'empire romain* [= EPRO], vol. 22), pp. 228 ff.

climax on November 3 with a holiday named *Hilaria*.<sup>17</sup> These holidays commemorated the Egyptian myth of Isis' tumultuous search for the limbs of her brother-husband Osiris, who had been cut up by the Egyptian god Seth-Typhon, and the pieces scattered throughout the world.<sup>18</sup> Until November 3, the holiday participants were in profound mourning, when, on that day, unbridled joyous processions suddenly burst forth, symbolizing the moment when Isis found Osiris and brought him back to life.<sup>19</sup> In the early fifth century CE farmers in the Faleria region in Italy still celebrated the discovery of Osiris' limbs on the Hilaria day, believing that the restoration of the god's body would ensure the success of the new harvest.<sup>20</sup> It is instructive that in the late fourth century CE the linguist Maurus Servius Honoratus, the leading Latin interpreter of the writings of Virgil (who was deemed by his contemporaries to be the most knowledgeable savant in all Italy), commented that Roman matrons would utter ceremonial cries in the city streets and crossroads on the day of the finding and rejoining of the limbs of Osiris by Isis, that is, the Hilaria festival!<sup>21</sup> If in such a late period, decades after the

---

<sup>17</sup> R. MERKELBACH, *Isisfeste in griechisch-römischer Zeit: Daten und Riten*, Meisenheim am Glan 1963, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> In Egyptian mythology, and beginning in the Hellenistic period in Greek mythology, as well, Isis was the sister and wife of Osiris. Seth-Typhon, the brother of Osiris, kills him and puts him into a coffin that is cast into the Nile River. Isis locates Osiris' coffin in Phoenicia, on the shore of Byblos / Gebal. She succeeds in resuscitating him momentarily, engages in sexual relations with him, and bears Horus, until Seth-Typhon snatches the body of Osiris for a second time and cuts it into fourteen pieces. Isis manages to find only thirteen of them, which she buries. The following day, Horus avenges his father Osiris by killing Seth-Typhon. On this myth, see the extensive discussions: M. ÉLIADE, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, vol. 1: *De l'âge de pierre aux mystères d'Éléusis*, Paris 1976, pp. 109-12; P. GRIMAL, *La mythologie grecque et romaine*, Paris <sup>11</sup>1991), pp. 238, 311-12; M. SARTRE, *L'orient romain*, Paris 1991, p. 473.

<sup>19</sup> The devotees of Isis would publicly, and vocally, proclaim their finding of Osiris' limbs as soon as November 3 came. See Plutarchus, *De Iside et Osiride*, 366f (for an English trans.: F. C. BABBITT, *LCL*, pp. 96-97); G. WISSOWA, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Munich <sup>2</sup>1912, p. 354; R. TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*, Paris <sup>2</sup>1992, pp. 116-17.

<sup>20</sup> Rutilius Namatianus, *De Reditu Suo*, (trans. and ed. J. VESSEREAU & F. PRÉCHAC, Paris 1935), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Servius obviously referred to the Hilaria festival, even if the word itself is not mentioned explicitly. See Servius, *In Vergilii Aeneidos LIBRVM QVARTVM Commentarius*, 609 (ed. G. THILO & H. HAGEN, vol. 1, Leipzig

pagan Roman empire had officially embraced Christianity, Isis worship continued by means of the Hilaria festival, then this teaches of the widespread nature of the phenomenon in the Late Roman period, when the empire was still pagan, although we still do not possess any express pagan testimonies to this.<sup>22</sup> We may therefore conclude that the festival that the Rabbis knew as *Hilaria* was in honour of Isis, since Servius' mention of matrons who celebrated the resurrection of Osiris on the Hilaria day closely corresponds with the passage in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*: "[...] the matron kept hinting, saying: 'Now, while the king conducts himself with you during the Hilaria, get at him for satisfaction of your wishes'."

A number of considerations, however, lead us to reject the Egyptian context, as well. First, the passage in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and the parallels link the Hilaria celebration with the rite of the emperor, while in the pagan sources mentioning the Hilaria festival in honour of the Egyptian goddess there is no proven connection with the rite of the emperor, except the tenuous fact that the emperor Gaius Caligula (37-41 CE) was the first to formally introduce the rite of Isis to Rome.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it transpires that the Rabbis used the term "Hilaria" because this festival was a quite common and widespread religious-cultic phenomenon in the third-century Land of Israel reality, and its popularity led to its inclusion in the midrashic literature. The rite of Isis, however, was almost nonexistent in Late Roman Palestine, and it is highly unlikely that the Rabbis referred to some obscure celebration in honour of a goddess whose rite, despite its popularity throughout the Roman Empire,<sup>24</sup> was negligible in the Land of Israel in their time.<sup>25</sup> Finally,

---

1881, p. 570): *unde permansit in eius sacris, ut certis diebus percompita a matronis exerceatur ululatus, sicut in Isidis sacris, ubi est imitatio inventi Osiridis quem dilaniatum a Typhone eius fratre uxor Isis per totum orbem requisisse narrator*; F. DUNAND, *Isis: Mère des Dieux*, Paris 2000, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> Put differently, if this term is connected to the rite of Isis, then the mention of the Hilaria festival in the Amoraitic literature is apparently the only testimony to this celebration in the third century CE in the east of the Roman empire, with the consequent importance of this term's appearance in the Talmudic literature.

<sup>23</sup> DUNAND, *Isis*, loc. cit.

<sup>24</sup> For general research of the spread of the Egyptian rite through the Roman empire, see, e.g., TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux*, pp. 83-104; on the spread of the cult of Isis in the eastern Mediterranean basin, see F. DUNAND, *Le Culte d'Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée*, vols. 1-3, Leiden 1973 (=



the Hilaria festival of Isis mentioned in the calendar of Philocalus is absent from other calendars, and especially from the *Feriale Duranum* list written on a papyrus that came to light during the archaeological excavations of the city of Dura-Europos (on the east bank of the Euphrates river) in the 1930s. This listing that is dated to 225-227 CE contains a list of the official holidays of the Roman *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum* that was encamped in Dura-Europos during those years. The importance of this list lies in its being the sole example of a complete Roman calendar from the Late Roman period that originated in the east of the empire.<sup>26</sup> Only Roman holidays and Roman deities are men-

---

EPRO, vol. 26). On the spread of the rite of the Egyptian goddess in the west of the Roman empire, see the extensive discussion: M. MALAISE, La diffusion des cultes égyptiens dans les provinces européennes de l'empire romain, in: W. HAASE & H. TEMPORINI (eds.), *ANRW* II,17,3 (1984), pp. 1615-92, and more.

<sup>25</sup> E. FRIEDHEIM, *Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine* (Master's thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1995), pp. 10-18, 87 (Hebrew). Although isolated finds possibly attesting to the rite of Isis have been discovered in the Land of Israel (FRIEDHEIM, loc. cit.), they should not be linked to a hypothetical festival named "Hilaria" in honour of this goddess. See IDEM, The Pagan Cults of Samaria-Sebaste in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods and the Ethnical Composition of the Local Population, in: Y. ESHEL (ed.), *Judea & Samaria Research Studies: Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting – 1996*, Kedumim / Ariel 1997, pp. 158-61 (Hebrew); IDEM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 200-208. Isis is not mentioned explicitly in the Rabbinic literature (see IDEM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, p. 201; IDEM, Who Are the Deities Concealed Behind the Rabbinic Expression 'A Nursing Female Image'?, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 96 [2003], pp. 239-50, esp. p. 240), although many scholars have thought otherwise from the late nineteenth century to the present. See, e.g., IDEM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 199 n. 712, 202 n. 721, 204 nn. 727-36. See also recently: BOHAK, Rabbinic Perspectives, p. 228; C. BEHAR, Les témoignages du culte de Sérapis dans la Palestine et le traité *Aboda Zara*, in: *Revue des Études Juives* 161 (2002), pp. 567-71, esp. p. 568; TZ. GROSSMARK, Laws regarding Idolatry in Jewelry as a Mirror Image of Jewish-Gentile Relations in the Land of Israel during Mishnaic and Talmudic Times, in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12 (2005), pp. 213-226, esp. p. 217; R. ULMER, Methodological Considerations in respect to Egyptian Cultural Icons in Rabbinic Literature: Cleopatra, Isis and Serapis, in: *Henoch* 29 (2007), pp. 327-353. To the best of our knowledge, however, no Roman-period temple of Isis has been unearthed in Roman Palestine. See DUNAND, *Le Culte d'Isis*, vol. 3, p. 132; R. A. WILD, The Known Isis-Serapis Sanctuaries from the Roman Period, in: W. HAASE & H. TEMPORINI (eds.), *ANRW* II,17,4, Berlin / New York 1984, p. 1754.

<sup>26</sup> R. O. FINK / A. S. HOEY & W. F. SNYDER, The *Feriale Duranum*, in: *Yale Classical Studies* 7 (1940), pp. 1-122; A. D. NOCK, The Roman Army and the



tioned in this calendar that excluded Eastern rites, even Hellenized Egyptian ones.<sup>27</sup> I showed elsewhere that the public celebrations listed in mAZ 1:2 (following MS. Kaufmann) closely correspond to the Roman festivals in the Roman military calendar from Dura-Europos;<sup>28</sup> and it is not inconceivable that the Rabbis were aware of this calendar. Since it lacked the Hilaria festival in honour of Isis, it is quite plausible that the Land of Israel Rabbis had no knowledge of this Egyptian holiday.

### 3. “Hilaria” – the Anatolian / Phrygian context:

The few scholars who discussed the appearance of the name *Hilaria* in the exegetical literature mostly ignored the fact that this holiday was the central ceremony in the rite of the Phrygian goddess Kybele, that was observed on March 25.<sup>29</sup> Between March 15 and 24 the adherents of Kybele would commemorate, and some would even reenact, the mythological castration and death of Attis, the lover of the Phrygian goddess. The profound mourning would peak on March 24, which was known as

---

Religious Year, in: *Harvard Theological Review* 45 (1952), pp. 187-215; R. O. FINK, *Roman Military Records on Papyrus*, Princeton 1971, nos. 117, 422-429; D. HELGELAND, Roman Army Religion, in: W. HAASE & H. TEMPORINI (eds.), *ANRW* II,16,2, Berlin / New York 1978, pp. 1470-81; D. FISHWICK, Dated Inscriptions and the Feriale Duranum, in: *Syria* 65 (1988), pp. 349-61.

<sup>27</sup> FISHWICK, Dated Inscriptions, pp. 349 ff.

<sup>28</sup> FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 341-44.

<sup>29</sup> Except for KRAUSS, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter*, vol. 1, p. 58, but this outstanding scholar undoubtedly noted the name of the holiday in the calendar of Philocalus, but was not aware of the cultic-ceremonial context that connected the content of the exegesis with the rite of the Anatolian goddess Kybele (see below). On this festival in the rite of Kybele, see the extensive discussions: F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris <sup>4</sup>1947), pp. 54, 56, 225 n. 41; J. BAYET, *Histoire politique et psychologique de la religion romaine*, Paris <sup>2</sup>1973, p. 216; W. BURKERT, *Les cultes à mystères dans l'antiquité*, Paris 1991, pp. 34, 68-69; TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux*, p. 52. The Latin term *hilaria* is also indicative of the festival to Isis, but, from the philological aspect, most linguists ascribe this holiday to the cult of Kybele. See, e.g., F. GAFFIOT, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français*, Paris <sup>3</sup>2000, p. 752, s. v. *Hilaria*. This might teach of the holiday's importance for scholars, as well. On the central celebrations in honour of Kybele, see P. LAMBRECHTS, Les fêtes ‘phrygiennes’ de Cybèle et d'Attis, in: *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 27 (1952), pp. 141-70; M. VAN DOREN, L'évolution des mystères phrygiens à Rome, in: *L'antiquité classique* 22 (1953), pp. 79-88, and many more.

“*Dies Sanguinis*” (the “day of blood”). During the procession that was accompanied by loud, mind-dulling music, the high priest of Kybele, the Archigallos, in a momentary trance, would castrate himself before the crowd, in a re-enactment of what had befallen Attis.<sup>30</sup> The following day (March 25) the faithful would celebrate the resurrection of Attis with a most festive day called Ἰλάρια, that was marked by an outbreak of exceptional rejoicing and debauchery among the believers, as is clearly indicated in the portrayal by the emperor Julian (360-363 CE) of the drastic and sudden transition - from chilling sorrow and brutal self-mutilation to unbridled revelry - that characterized the March rite of Kybele.<sup>31</sup> Beginning in the time of the emperor Commodus (180-192

---

<sup>30</sup> On these priests who conducted ceremonial (actual) castration, see the following studies: G. WIDENGREN, Quelques remarques sur l'émascation rituelle chez les peuples sémitiques, in: *Studia Orientalia* 1 (1953), pp. 377-84; L. RICHARD, Juvénal et les Galles de Cybèle, in: *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 169 (1966), pp. 51-67; G. M. SANDERS, Gallos, in: *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum* vol. 8 (1972), pp. 984-1034; A. D. NOCK, Eunuchs in Ancient Religion, in: IDEM, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA 1972, pp. 463-500, and more.

<sup>31</sup> Iulianus, *Oration V. in Matr. Deorum*, 169d (for an English trans.: W. C. WRIGHT, *LCL*, pp. 472-73): οὐπερ γενομένου πάντος ἔπεσθαι χρὴ τὰ Ἰλάρια. Τί γὰρ εὐθυμότερον, τί δὲ ἱλαρώτερον γένοιτο ἂν ψυχῆς ἀπειρίαν μὲν καὶ γένεσιν καὶ τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ κλύδωνα διαφυγούσης, ἐπὶ δὲ τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτοὺς ἀναχθείσης. It seems that celebrating during these days was obligatory during the Late Roman period, as is implied by the following source: *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* [= *SHA*], *Aurelianus* 1:1: “Hilaribus, quibus omnia festa et fieri debere scimus et dici” (for a French trans.: A. CHASTAGNOL, Paris 1994, p. 968). For an analysis of the orgiastic ardour of the believers in Kybele on this day, see the excellent studies: P. PACHIS, Γαλλαῖον κυβέλης ὀλόλυγμα (*ANTHOL. PALAT.* VI, 173): L'élément orgiastique dans le culte de Cybèle, in: E. N. LANE (ed.), *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M. J. Vermaseren*, Leiden / New York / Cologne 1996, pp. 212-13, 219; R. TURCAN, Attis Platonius, in: *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults*, p. 402; P. BORGEAUD, *La Mère des dieux: de Cybèle à la vierge Marie*, Paris 1996, p. 133. Immediately evident is the parallelism between the myths: between the mourning over the death of Attis among the believers in Kybele and the ensuing rejoicing, and the grief by the devotees of Isis at the death of Osiris and the joy that follows the latter's resurrection, with the celebration, in both instances, named “Hilaria”. On the ceremonial level, incidentally, at times the same priest served Isis and Kybele. See L. VIDMAN, *Isis und Serapis bei den Griechen und Römern*, Berlin 1970, pp. 139-55; MALAISE, *Les conditions de pénétration*, pp. 461-68. Thus, in the syncretistic spirit of the age of polytheism, the phenomenon of death and resurrection, or of human birth and rebirth after a person's death (*Natus et Renatus*), were characteristic of many

CE), the Hilaria festival became an impressive event that not only represented the resurrection and return of Attis, it also marked the revival of the seasons of the year and agricultural life in the beginning of the spring season.<sup>32</sup> This main component of this celebration was the mass procession, with the participation of the emperor himself and representatives of the upper classes of Roman society (*honestiores*), such as senators and equestrians. Significantly, during the course of the procession the emperor and the members of the nobility distributed all manner of precious figurines all made of gold and silver, which would be presented to the masses at the feet of the statues of Kybele and Attis.<sup>33</sup> It is related that the emperor Alexander Severus (222-235 CE), who would always devotedly feed his servants vegetables, meats, and legumes, as the latter's forefathers had done (by providing for their children), would give them precious fowl such as pheasants - at times even two - in addition to two chickens, on certain holidays, such as the Roman new year that fell in January (*Kalendae Ianuariae*), the magnificent games to Appolo (*Ludi Appolinares*) that were held on July 6-13, the banquet to Jupiter Capitolinus that was conducted on September, and, most relevant to our discussion, on the Hilaria celebrations in honour of the "mother of the gods" on March 25.<sup>34</sup> This instructive source finely

---

cults with mystery rites that promised their believers happiness in this world and eternal life in the hereafter. The Rabbis, however, were seemingly exposed to only a single rite, and not to the syncretistic system characteristic of the pagan world.

<sup>32</sup> Although in the past, some scholars thought that nothing was known regarding the holiday's rites (see P. DECHARME, Cybele, in: C. DAREMBERG & E. SAGLIO [eds.], *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, 1 / 2, Paris 1880 [= repr. Graz 1969], p. 1682b: "nous en ignorons les détails"), we currently possess more, and detailed, information concerning this festival. On the ceremony, see TURCAN, *Attis Platonius*, pp. 50, 53. It is noteworthy that in 187 CE a person named Martinus attempted to assassinate the emperor Commodus during the Hilaria festivities; he was caught in time and immediately executed. The celebrations that year were more magnificent than in previous years, after the crowds declared that the goddess Kybele had saved the emperor. This impressive event was commemorated on imperial coins from the time of Commodus. See Herodianus, *Historia Romana* 1:10:5-7; R. TURCAN, *Numismatique romaine du culte métroaque*, Leiden 1983 (= EPRO, vol. 97), pp. 37 ff., and the references to primary sources.

<sup>33</sup> TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux*, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> See the statement attributed to Aelius Lampridius concerning the emperor Alexander Severus: *SHA, Alexander Severus*, 37:4-6: *Nam semper de manu*

clarifies the statement attributed to the matron in the exegesis by Rav, the contemporary of this emperor,<sup>35</sup> concerning the king: "while the king conducts himself with you during the Hilaria, get at him for satisfaction of your wishes."<sup>36</sup> In the Roman sources, we know of the Hilaria mainly from the city of Rome; to the best of our knowledge, no literary or epigraphic extra-Rabbinic source confirms the existence of the Hilaria festival in the Land of Israel and the Syrian-Phoenician east in the first centuries CE.<sup>37</sup> A number of archaeological finds, however, attest to the existence of the Anatolian rite of Kybele in Roman Palestine and its surroundings. Thus, for example, in Ptolemais-Akko, Kybele appears on city coins from the third century CE.<sup>38</sup> A statue of Ky-

---

*sua ministris convivii et panem et partes aut holerum aut carnis aut leguminum dabat, senili prorsus maturitate patrem familias agens. Erant decreta et carnis diversae pondo triginta, erant et gallinaci duo. Adhibebatur anser diebus festis, kalendis autem Ianuariis et Hilariis matris deum et ludi Apollinariibus et Iovis epulo et Saturnalibus et huius modi festis diebus fasianus, ita ut aliquando et duo ponerentur additis gallinaciis duobus* (for a trans. to French: A. CHASTAGNOL, Paris 1994, pp. 602-3).

<sup>35</sup> It should be recalled at this juncture that R. Judah ha-Nasi was almost certainly still alive in 222 CE, when Alexander Severus waived the coronation tax (*aurum coronarium*) upon his ascending the throne, since R. Judah mentions the abolition of this tax. See bBB 8a: "the demand for the coronation tax was repealed". On this statement, see S. SAFRAI, On the Chronological Problem of the Patriarchs in the Second and Third Centuries CE, in: *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B, History of the Jewish People*, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 56-57 (= S. SAFRAI, *In Times of the Temple and Mishnah – Studies in Jewish History*, Jerusalem 1994, vol. 2, p. 626) (Hebrew): "Rabbi [= R. Judah ha-Nasi] lived at least until the summer of 222"; D. ROKEAH, 'Am Ha-arets, First Pietists, Jesus and Christians, in: Y. SUSSMAN & D. ROSENTHAL (eds.), *Mehqerei Talmud – Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*, vol. III / 2, Jerusalem 2005, p. 901 n. 65 (Hebrew). R. Judah ha-Nasi's pupil Abba ben Aivu (Rav), went to Babylonia at approximately that time, and he might therefore have had knowledge of Alexander Severus' actions during the Hilaria celebrations in honour of Kybele and have included them in his exposition. This question requires further study.

<sup>36</sup> For the textual variants, see above, n. 8.

<sup>37</sup> With the consequent importance of this isolated detail, that not only sheds light on what the Amoraim knew about this holiday, but is also a major source for the study of Eastern paganism in Late Roman Palestine. See, again, LÉVY, Cultes et rites.

<sup>38</sup> F. DE SAULCY, *Numismatique de la terre sainte*, Paris 1874, p. 168 nos. 5-6; M. AVI-YONAH, *Historical Geography of Palestine from the Persian*



bele from the Late Roman period was discovered in Caesarea Maritima.<sup>39</sup> We similarly know of Anatolian rites in third-century CE Caesarea, as can be learned from, for example, a fragmentary dedicatory inscription to Jupiter Dolichenus;<sup>40</sup> the discovery of a statue of the goddess Artemis in the city of Ephesia in Asia Minor;<sup>41</sup> and gems bearing the image of the Anatolian moon-god Men.<sup>42</sup> In Ascalon, as well, archaeological excavations unearthed a third-century CE figurine of Kybele.<sup>43</sup> This goddess might possibly appear on coins of Neapolis / Shechem from the Roman period, and she could very well have been worshipped in the city in the late Hellenistic period.<sup>44</sup> Some scholars argued for the existence of the rite of Kybele in Aelia Capitolina in the third century CE,<sup>45</sup> but the arguments they advanced are not convinc-

---

*Period to the Beginning of the Arab Conquest*, Jerusalem <sup>4</sup>1984, p. 147 (Hebrew); A. Kasher, *Canaan, Philistia, Greece and Israel* (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 35 (Hebrew).

<sup>39</sup> R. GERSHT, *Roman Sculpture in the Land of Israel* (unpubl. master's thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1978), p. 24 no. 84 (Hebrew); IDEM, *Roman Sculpture of Caesarea-Maritima* (unpubl. Ph. D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1987), pp. 33-34 no. 27, p. 16 (Hebrew).

<sup>40</sup> B. LIFSHITZ, Notes d'épigraphie palestinienne, II: Le culte de Jupiter Dolichénus à Césarée, in: *Revue Biblique* 73 (1966), p. 255.

<sup>41</sup> J. RINGEL, *Césarée de Palestine: Étude historique et archéologique*, Strasbourg 1974, p. 111 pl. XI; GERSHT, *Roman Sculpture of Caesarea*, p. 22 no. 15; *Israel Museum*, inventory no. 62.94; for a photograph of the figurine, see KASHER, *Canaan*, p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> A. HAMBURGER, *Gems from Caesarea Maritima*, Jerusalem 1968 (= *Atiqot*, Engl. Ser. vol. 8), p. 26 no. 18: "Bust of Men [...] wearing radiate, star-studded Phrygian cap and chlamys. Crescent moon behind shoulders"; FRIEDHEIM, *Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>43</sup> M. J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque*, vol. 1, Leiden 1987 (= EPRO, vol. 50), p. 265 no. 897.

<sup>44</sup> DE SAULCY, *Numismatique*, p. 226 nos. 5-6 (the reign of Philip the Arab, 244-249 CE); and for an opposing view: R. DUSSAUD, Symboles et simulacres du dieu solaire, in: *Notes de mythologie syrienne*, Paris 1905, p. 368 and n. 2. On the rite of Kybele in the Shechem area in the Hellenistic period or Early Roman period, see also R. JONAS, A Diadem of the Cult of Kybele from the Neapolis Region (Samaria), in: *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 94 (1962), pp. 118-28; VERMASEREN, *Corpus*, p. 265 no. 896.

<sup>45</sup> C. HANAUER, Remarks on the Supposed Shrine of Cybele Found near the Garden Tomb, in: *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1924), pp. 187-92.

ing.<sup>46</sup> Many Anatolian rites that were closely linked to the rite of Kybele were observed in different places in Roman Palestine, such as the city of Geva (in the area of Mishmar ha-Emek), where a temple of the god Men apparently was active from the time of the emperor Domitian (81-96 CE), as is indicated by the numismatic and epigraphic finds from the site.<sup>47</sup> The scholarly research has also shown some Tannaim, such as R. 'Akiva, had detailed knowledge of the Syrian, and especially Anatolian, rites.<sup>48</sup>

In conclusion, the geographical distribution of the rite of Kybele in Roman Palestine and its surroundings allows us to surmise the existence of the Hilaria festival, as well, in this region, and that the Jews of the Land of Israel probably had some experience with it, to the extent that the Land of Israel Amoraim did not need to use a word of Semitic origin to describe a contemporary situation identical to the Hilaria.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> E. FRIEDHEIM, *The Religious and Cultural World of Aelia Capitolina: A New Perspective*, in: *Archiv Orientalní* 75 (2007), pp. 125-52, esp. p. 131.

<sup>47</sup> Y. MESHORER, *City-Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period*, Jerusalem 1985, p. 38 nos. 98, 101; p. 113 nos. 99, 102; A. KINDLER, *The Coins from Geva*, in: B. MAZAR (ed.), *Geva: Archaeological Discoveries at Tell Abu-Shusha, Mishmar ha-Emek*, Tel Aviv 1988, pp. 47-48 nos. 14-15 (Hebrew); B. ISAAC, *Two Greek Inscriptions from Tell Abu-Shusha*, in: *Geva: Archaeological Discoveries*, p. 225. Although the inscription is only a single word ἀρχιερεύ[ς] (= high priest), the intent is to a pagan priest (ISAAC, loc. cit.: “this is undoubtedly a local pagan rite”); and since the rite of Men was the chief cult in the city, the priest most probably worshiped this deity; FRIEDHEIM, *Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine*, p. 180. The connection between the rite of Men and that of Kybele is that both were Phrygian, and that Men was a moon-god - and the full moon played an important role in the rite of Kybele; see TURCAN, *Les cultes orientaux*, p. 74. This point is of great importance, because the Land of Israel Rabbis were aware that Gentiles – and apparently Jews, as well – worshiped the moon; see, e.g., mAZ 3:3; tAZ 5:1 (ed. ZUCKERMANDEL, p. 468); yAZ 3:3, 42d; bAZ 42b; tHul 2:18 (ed. ZUCKERMANDEL, p. 503): “If one slaughters in the name of the sun, in the name of the moon [...] this is the flesh of sacrifices to the dead”; bHul 40a; bAZ 42b. Consequently, among the numerous lunar gods in the Land of Israel, they might also have been aware of the Anatolian Men, and similarly of the Phrygian Kybele, who was known as the “great mother” (*Magna Mater*).

<sup>48</sup> FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 138-52.

<sup>49</sup> It is noteworthy that R. Johanan (d. 279 CE), who used the term *hilaria* (above, at n. 6), was quite familiar with the pagan rites, especially the Eastern cults, despite his declaration: “We are not expert regarding the fine details of idolatry as was Jacob” (see BerR 81 [ed. THEODOR-ALBECK, p. 973]). His



We see that the term *hilaria* was commonly known during the time of the Talmud, and it seems that the Land of Israel Amoraim could find no more patent antithesis to the day on which the Torah was given, when the Israelites stood “in awe, trembling, and sweat” when faced with the greatness of the hour, than the pagan Hilaria celebrations in honour of Kybele, whose unbridled debauchery breached the moral bounds set by the Rabbis. Moreover, the Rabbis apparently could find no better analogy for the situation in which the Jews were mandated to address their requests to God, who would grant their wishes, than that of the Gentiles on the Hilaria day in honour of the Anatolian / Phrygian Kybele, who were treated so generously by the Roman emperor.<sup>50</sup>

---

thorough and detailed knowledge of many pagan practices is evident in his numerous dicta regarding idolatry, since his various rulings attest to a profound awareness of this subject. See, e.g., yShevi 8:8, 38b-c (and see in this context: G. J. BLIDSTEIN, R. Yohanan, Idolatry and Public Privileges, in: *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods* 5 [1974], pp. 154-61); yAZ 3:3, 42d (and see: FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 177-88); bYev 46a; bSanh 49a; 60b-61a; 62a; bAZ 8a; 13a; 14a; 16b; 19b; 22a; 30b, and many more. He might also have been conscious of Anatolian rites, as is indicated by a tradition in bYoma 22b: “For R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon ben Jehozadak: One should not appoint a person as a leader of the community unless he carries a basket of reptiles on his back, so that if he becomes arrogant, he may be told: Turn around.” Y. Meshorer explained that the “basket of reptiles” mentioned in the tradition is almost certainly the Κίστη μυστικά, with this meaning, that appears on many Land of Israel coins, such as in Sebaste-Samaria. See Y. MESHORER, The ‘Cista Mystica’ and Worship of Kore-Persephone at Samaria, in: *Eretz-Israel* 15 (1981), pp. 356-57 (Hebrew). The *cista mystica* is indicative of the existence of the mystery rites of many gods, including the Anatolian gods Kybele and Attis; see CUMONT, *Les religions orientales*, p. 225 and n. 41; BURKERT, *Les cultes à mystères*, p. 18 and n. 31; E. M. W. TILLYARD, A Cybele Altar in London, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 7 (1917), pp. 284-288, esp. pp. 284, 285 and pl. VIII. MESHORER, Cista Mystica, p. 357, suggested the following understanding of R. Johanan's dictum: he recommends appointing as communal leader someone who in the past underwent the secret experience of the mysteries, and has now mended his ways, so that if he does not properly carry out his responsibilities to the public, he is to be told: “Turn around”. It therefore is not inconceivable that R. Johanan was cognizant of the rite of Kybele and Attis; and if so, then this sage, as well, was aware of the central festival in honour of Kybele, namely, the Hilaria.

<sup>50</sup> It would be interesting to compare this with the use made by the Rabbis in their expositions of the Maiumas celebrations. These festivities, with their emphasis on licentiousness and harlotry, were dedicated to the Hellenized

Phoenician-Syrian rite of Aphrodite-Astarte-Atargatis and Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. This celebration was observed in many locations in Palestine and the surrounding area in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods; see the recent study: E. DVORJETSKI, *The Maiumas Festivals at Ashkelon during the Byzantine Period* – ‘What was perpetrated by the coastal cities was not perpetrated by the generation of the Flood’, in: A. SASSON / Z. SAFRAI & N. SAGIV (eds.), *Ashkelon: A City on the Seashore*, Tel Aviv 2001, pp. 100-104 (Hebrew); FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme*, pp. 87-98. Thus, e.g., the Rabbis compared the despicable behaviour of the people of Israel in the time of Amos to the Maiumas; see MekhY, *be-šalah* 1 (ed. HOROWITZ-RABIN, p. 84 and n. 9); and esp. WayR 5:3 (ed. MARGULIES, p. 108 and n. 6): “What is ‘festive meals’ (Amos 6:7)? R. Aivu said: They had thirteen maiumas [celebrations], one for each tribe and one for them all. All were destroyed, and nothing remained of them save this - to make known what abominations came from them”; TanB, *šemini* 8 (ed. BUBER, pp. 26-27). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Büchler showed this midrashic passage closely corresponds to the “place of revelry (βητομαρσεα ή κ[αί] Μαιουμας)” mentioned in the Madaba map (see A. BÜCHLER, *Une localité énigmatique mentionnée sur la mosaïque de Madaba*, in: *Revue des Études Juives* 42 [1901], pp. 125-28), where orgies were conducted in honour of Baal-Peor until the Roman period; see also C. CLERMONT-GANNEAU, *Betomarsea-Maioumas et les fêtes orgiaques de Baal-Peor*, in: *Recueil d’Archéologie Orientale*, vol. 4, Paris 1901, pp. 339-45. Further to this exegesis, we should mention that, in all their expositions, the Rabbis severely condemned the Maiumas rites (for a summation of the sources, see DVORJETSKI, *The Maiumas Festivals*, pp. 103 ff.), with the exception of a single midrash that surprisingly compares the Revelation with the Maiumas celebration. See MTehil 18:17 (ed. BUBER, pp. 146-47; trans. based on W. G. BRAUDE, New Haven 1959, pp. 246-47): “R. Judah ha-Nasi [in different textual witnesses: R. Yuden Nesi’in; see BUBER, ad loc., n. 110; this exegesis might have originated in the third century CE] said: A flesh-and-blood king when going out to war takes all his troops with him, but when going to his Maiumas [wrongly translated by Braude: May Festival] takes only his body-guard to wait upon him. But the Holy One, blessed be He, when He goes out to war, goes alone, as it is said (Exod. 15:3): ‘The Lord, the Warrior, Lord is His name’; but when He goes to His Maiumas, the giving of the Torah, see what Scripture says: ‘God’s chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands [the Lord is among them as in Sinai in holiness]’ (Ps. 68:18); and also: ‘And the Lord my God [with all the holy beings] will come to you’ (Zech. 14:5).” Although in the various parallels the word *maiumas*, in relation to the Giving of the Torah, was exchanged by other terms, *maiumas* appears to be the correct version (see BUBER, op cit., n. 111: “And in *Sifrei* [...], ‘When he comes forth unscathed [*le-šalom*]’, the version is undoubtedly *maiumas*, and one of the copyists inadvertently wrote *le-šalom*.” The word *maiumas* here denotes the king’s excessive rejoicing; and in Ostia, near Rome, both the Roman senators and the emperor would dive into the sea in honour of Aphrodite

---

and Dionysus in the festive Maiumas rite. See J. CARCOPINO, *Virgile et les origines d'Ostie*, Paris <sup>2</sup>1968, pp. 129-33. In MTehil the exegete sought to draw an analogy between the supreme joy of the Holy One, blessed be He, at the Giving of the Torah and the renowned delight of the Roman emperor during the Maiumas festival. In, however, the expositions that mention the Hilaria, the Land of Israel Amoraim sought to depict the fear with which the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, the total antithesis to the licentiousness and frivolity that characterized the Gentile participants at the Hilaria festival in honour of Kybele. As is well-known, the Rabbis frequently use imagery drawn from the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture to vitalize the Biblical narratives for their audience, who were quite familiar with the contemporary culture. The aggadic literature therefore contains parables relating to athletes - an image that originated in the Roman games, and the like (see S. LIEBERMAN, *Greek in Jewish Palestine – Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C. E.*, New York <sup>2</sup>1950, pp. 156ff; D. STERN, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge MA 1991, pp. 27ff; TZ. GROSSMARK, Images of God in Rabbinical Literature Borrowed from the Sphere of the Roman Spectacles, in: *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B, History of the Jewish People*, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 75-84 [Hebrew]. The fact that the Land of Israel Amoraim were even willing to use patently pagan motifs that were known to the Jews of the land, such as the lascivious rites performed by the neighbouring Gentiles, to portray different behavioural patterns (as circumstances dictated), both of the Israelites and, at times, of the God of Israel, is eloquent.